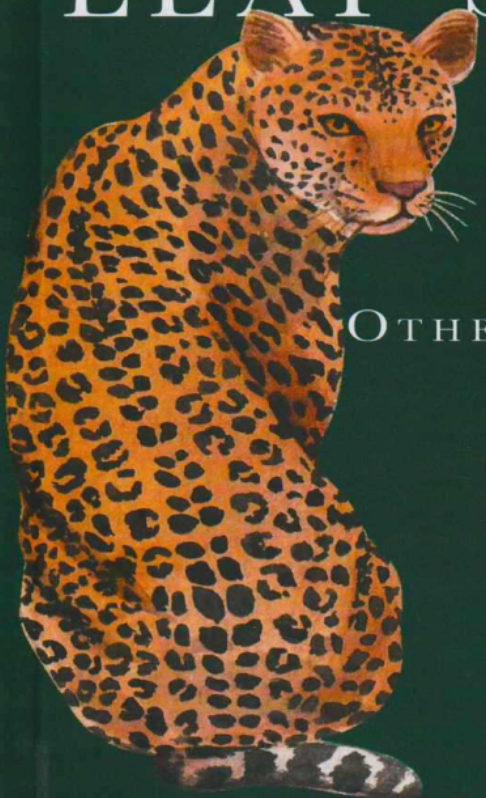
INDIRA DANGI

THE LEAP SECOND



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OTHER STORIES

Translated from the Hindi

Edited by Rituparna Mukherjee

MOVING WORDS

A Little Butterfly Comes

On a warm summer evening, the bustling metropolitan market buzzed with vibrant energy. The air was filled with the scent of various spices, the chatter of eager shoppers, and the melodies of street musicians. Among the crowd, a husband and wife found themselves in search of a modestly priced saree for a special gift. They parked their scooter and stepped into a charming shop adorned with colourful fabrics.

As they ventured further into the grand showroom, a flicker of uncertainty crossed their faces. They wondered if they had stumbled upon the wrong place. Before they could turn away, however, the attentive shop staff noticed their presence and warmly greeted them, “Welcome! Welcome! What can we show you today?” The couple couldn’t bring themselves to decline the invitation, feeling both grateful and guilty for attracting attention.

They settled onto plush stools that resembled luxurious sofas. The young husband stole a glance at his well-worn office shirt, faded pants, a rexine belt, and leather sandals. But even more faded than his attire was the face of his young wife, adorned with bracelets worth only twenty-five rupees, a deceptively expensive saree acquired from a cut-piece saree centre, slippers gifted by her workplace, and a delicate *mangalsutra* with fine grains of gold...! She deftly adjusted her sari, gracefully draping it from one shoulder to the other, concealing the delicate bracelets and *mangalsutra* that were once visible. However, her husband couldn’t help but be mindful of the value of every item she had adorned herself with at that moment. A familiar irritation crept over him as if he stood under a glaring spotlight at a busy crossroad.

“How many times have I reminded you to dress appropriately when you get out? It seems like frugality runs in your blood! When will you stop being so miserly? Why did you wear those bracelets? Did you buy those five-hundred rupees bracelets just to store them away in the cupboard?”

“They are meant to be worn on special occasions like weddings and family gatherings. If I keep saving them for such rare moments, who will buy me new ones?” The wife wanted to retort, but she remained silent as the shopkeeper stood nearby.

“What can I show you, madam?” the shopkeeper asked.

The man replied, “Sarees worth gifting!”

The shopkeeper instructed a helper to retrieve a bundle from a high shelf, and the husband and wife began to explore the store filled with breathtakingly expensive sarees. In front of the glass showcases, they beheld intricately adorned lehengas and sarees with open sides,

exuding a mesmerizing charm. Both of them observed these garments with detached ignorance, as if they were encountering an unfamiliar faith.

"Take a look, ma'am. This is the latest trend," the shopkeeper said, spreading out the first saree under twinkling milky lights. The glistening gemstones embedded in the sky-blue saree resembled countless morning stars sparkling across a fresh sky. However, the stern faces of the husband and wife remained devoid of any emotion. The shopkeeper proceeded to unveil the second saree.

"Take a look at this exquisite piece! It has come all the way from Surat just for us. You won't find another saree like this in the entire market. Golden pearls have been delicately stitched onto the green saree, resembling radiant flowers blooming in soft sand." An indescribable chill ran through his chest, causing him to involuntarily straighten up and then slump down. Without knowing the price, the husband uttered, "Show us some sarees with more reasonable rates."

"Our prices are the most reasonable in the market, sir! No matter where you search, you won't find this saree for anything less than four to five thousand, but we offer it for just thirty-eight hundred," the shopkeeper replied.

"No, we need something even more affordable," the husband responded. Hearing the price, he quickly withdrew his fingers from the edge of the saree, as if he feared that his touch might tarnish the golden flowers and morning stars, resulting in an astronomical amount of damage. Meanwhile, the shopkeeper fetched another bundle from a lower shelf, and the wife rose from her seat to stand in front of the sarees showcased.

Her eyes wandered deeply, feasting upon the beauty of each intricate saree and lehenga, as if she sought to capture their enchantment in a fleeting moment. From a young age, the woman had been captivated by such allure—golden, red, blue, yellow, crimson, black, each colour seemed to dance and intertwine with diamonds, pearls, shimmering stars, and delicate silk thread work, bestowing a heart-rending charm upon the sarees. A melancholic smile graced her face for a moment and vanished, as she was about to turn away. However, her gaze halted at the final resplendent beauty shining in the display case.

Simultaneously, the shopkeeper unveiled another bundle before the man. "This is a brand new kumkum print, sir... Have you seen that famous TV serial? The heroine wears the same saree in it, and it's priced at only twelve hundred."

"And take a look at this unique piece—an enchanting peacock-coloured design that you won't find anywhere else, sir! It's priced at just eighteen hundred," the shopkeeper added, presenting yet another

captivating option.

“Sir, there is no match for this chiffon piece!” the shopkeeper exclaimed.

Meanwhile, the husband insisted, “Show us something within a lower price range.”

On the other hand, the wife remained entranced by the allure of the last dress in the showcase. The delicate silver stars scattered on the fabric, adorned with a beautiful blend of rosy green and deep red, appeared like a breathtaking embroidery that could only be the work of a divine hand. The zari work on the border possessed an alluring charm akin to Vishnu’s illusions. The woman became completely absorbed in the beauty of the dress, unable to contain her emotions.

“What a stunning saree!” She exclaimed.

The shopkeeper, who had already gauged the customer’s budget, responded without even looking at the woman, “That’s not a saree, ma’am. It’s a lehenga.”

“A lehenga? So simple! How much does it cost?” she inquired.

“It’s priced at two thousand, madam,” the shopkeeper replied.

“Only two thousand for this lehenga!” Overwhelmed with joy, the woman couldn’t contain her excitement. Happiness radiated from her eyes, face, and smile. Sensing an opportunity, the shopkeeper seized the moment.

“Please have a seat, madam. We will bring you a piece like that right away. Bunty, show the first bundle on the right to the madam,” the shopkeeper instructed his assistant.

“First, let’s see the saree that brought us here!” There was a hint of both urgency and scolding in the husband’s voice.

“You go ahead and check that out,” the wife responded, seemingly transformed.

Now the helper began showing the embellished lehenga to the wife, while the shopkeeper displayed the saree to the husband.

“This one has a simple and elegant south Indian look, priced at only seven hundred rupees,” the shopkeeper mentioned.

“And this printed Chunariya is available for just six hundred and fifty rupees,” he continued.

“No, we are looking for something even more affordable... I mentioned before that I intend to give it as a gift. If it were for personal use, I wouldn’t mind spending a bit more,” the husband said, humbly smiling.

“What price range are you looking for in sarees?” The shopkeeper paused, his hand still in the process of displaying the sarees.

“Around three or four hundred?” the husband replied, shrinking further into his hesitancy.

“We have a collection of daily wear sarees right outside. You can

have a look yourself.", the shopkeeper suggested putting away everything from the ethereal morning stars to the resplendent south.

As the second customer arrived, the shopkeeper resumed showcasing beautiful sarees that seemed like enchanting dreams. "Look, ma'am, it's the latest trend! You won't find another saree like this in the entire market. It's intentionally unique, which is why we have only one piece from Surat!"

At that moment, the husband gently touched his wife, who was meticulously examining the lehenga with a mesmerized expression. "Rashi, come, let us have a look at these sarees outside," he whispered, pointing towards the plain and soft sarees neatly stacked in bundles outside the shop.

"No, let's focus on this one first! What a gorgeous lehenga, and it's priced at just two thousand! My friend Meenu wore the exact same lehenga at her wedding, and she told me it cost ten thousand. It was a designer piece back then, but after two and a half years, it has become so common! Just imagine, it's available for only two thousand! Let's take it!" The wife spoke in the softest voice possible, but her joy couldn't be contained.

"We can buy it later! Right now, let's choose the saree for the gift, the one we came here for," the husband interjected.

"But I have two thousand rupees!" the wife insisted.

"Rashi, please," the husband pleaded, trying to appear as composed as possible in the eyes of the shopkeeper and the assistants. However, the wife sensed the true meaning behind his voice and briefly glanced at her husband's face. At that moment, she saw their entire married life etched upon his features:

The days of youthful innocence, dreams, and beauty before their marriage.

The anticipation and realization of their wedding dreams.

The struggles of establishing a new household weighed heavily on them.

The wife suddenly regained her awareness: her husband's modest income, their rented flat, their dreams of owning a house, and the difficult decision to postpone having children for a little longer. Every penny counted, as they relied on their meagre savings.

In the next moment, the wife's previous happiness dissipated from her face, akin to a butterfly fluttering away, while the shopkeeper asked, "Shall I pack it?"

"No, wait! Are there other colours available for this?" The young woman, who had expressed her genuine liking for the lehenga, found it difficult to decline now.

The servant rose to fetch the lehenga in another colour, while the husband and wife silently began examining and touching the

inexpensive sarees displayed on the left side.

"This one seems fine," they both said simultaneously, pointing to a pink saree.

Meanwhile, the helper unfolded the second colour of the lehenga, saying, "Look, sister, this yellow-crimson combination. It will suit you beautifully."

The helper stood up and draped the lehenga on himself. The woman's eyes sparkled momentarily and then dimmed.

"Leave it. Pack this saree instead," she decided.

"Hey! But you liked the lehenga so much! Take it, and we'll give you a discount," the shopkeeper insisted.

"No, we'll consider it another time. For now, just this saree…!" the wife asserted.

After paying for the saree, the couple left the shop. The young wife's face wore a sombre expression, akin to a dark evening. The husband placed his hand on her shoulder.

"You really liked that lehenga?" He asked.

But it seemed the wife didn't hear him. As they crossed the road and headed towards a chaat cart, a new shade of happiness enveloped her face, akin to a small, joyful butterfly.

"I can't remember the last time we had chaat," she remarked.

Translated by Anuradha Dosad

Bridge

The bridge seems to connect two worlds…

As soon as I get out of the school, darkness has fallen; there was an inspection and all the important papers needed to be sent right after. I don't really prefer being the in-charge principal on the weekends, because whenever that happens, there is quite a lot of work. I usually leave for the city on Saturdays, and by that time, my mind gets bored with everything here. I will have to drive my car for hours. I am headed to my destination driving slowly through the muddy, broken road. I have left the village of the Bhil community behind; there are scarcely one or two people and pets or cattle visible; my heart skips a beat. I really should have left sooner. I cannot drive my car any faster on this road. The roads are pitched but they are in such terrible condition that one wonders if the contractors have a lot of supporters in the province. The capital allocates a lot of money to this distant province but the money roams the hands of many middlemen, making them rich, the Adivasis meanwhile remain as they are.

My family was overjoyed when I finally got the job of a teacher in a government school this year. My relatives started saying that I must have done something extraordinary in my previous birth to be so fortunate as to get a government job in this one. My first posting was far away from the city, amidst the Adivasis, but my relatives asked me to have courage—to adjust for a few days and then apply for a transfer. I stay in one of the rooms in the school. I have purchased an old car with which I cross the hills, rivers, forests and valleys every weekend and head to my home in the city.

I am slowly driving down the hillside. The road will become better once I reach the bridge across the river. And once I cross the forest and the valley and take the national highway, I don't need to worry. But my heart always beats faster on this particular hill. I become aware that this car is second-hand; if I try to drive it too fast it might break down. I don't know how to drive that well either. Sometimes I think of getting myself a driver and travelling the distance every day. At least at night, I would get to be with my pregnant wife, with my unborn child, in the comforts of my home. But the immense cost of the entire affair stops me. My wife now wants to separate from our joint family. She is saving every penny to buy a flat here and I… I drive my second-hand car, despite being a poor driver, against my wishes.

I can see the bridge now, and the large banyan tree by its side. I had tied a thread on one of its long prop roots last Monday on my way back to school. Ever since my wife came to know about this banyan tree, she has wanted me to tie a thread on one of the prop roots,

conveying our heartfelt wishes. I didn't have the heart to deny her wish, but I personally do not believe in these things. It's all-wasteful superstition! Nowadays, I quietly listen to every word she says, and sometimes, I obey them as well. Especially since she has been saying this for a long time and that day after a narrow escape from a terrible accident, I not only tied the proverbial thread but also wrote out an application sitting by the bridge. Respected Education Minister, please transfer me to my home town or else transfer me so far that I cannot travel to my home on weekends. My wife does not want to stay with me in the place of my current posting nor can she stay more than four or six days away because of my child. I felt emotional while writing that application. I love my wife and my unborn child a lot, and she doesn't ask for much! Just that I arrange for a transfer to my home city and live happily with my family. She had spent many an inconvenient and insulting day in the joint family while I worked as a part-time teacher. It is now my duty to… I crumpled the application and threw it from the bridge into the river. While throwing away the paper, I cast a fleeting glance at the river and was immediately taken. It was an enchanting river—the rock-filled, wild river flowed down with a soothing sound, its waters transparent, sparkling. I wondered how elixir looked—it probably looked like this. I don't know how long I would have stared at the beauty of the sight when I heard someone calling.

"Babuji, are you planning to give up on your life?"

When I turned, I saw a shepherd with his flock of sheep.

"I am just looking at the flowing water; not planning to end my life."

"Even if you don't plan on doing it, it will take yours, as it has of many. I would advise you to leave immediately."

He stood there as though he was the protector of my life.

"Water gives life."

"I am not talking about the water, just the place where you are standing."

"Place!" I laughed; then glanced at my watch on my wrist. I hurried. I wanted to reach school at least before the second half began. I was the teacher-in-charge for the week. I moved towards my car. He said from behind,

"I sacrifice chickens every year and goats every third year. Otherwise, none of my sheep will get out alive from this place."

I don't know what else he might have said, I left the place. I now think that his words about that place were quite interesting.

And the place was right in front of me. The babbling sound in the dense darkness signaled the presence of the living waters. Had it been a moonlit night, I would have stopped and stared at the beauty of the

river. But the night was so dark that one could scarcely make out one's own hands. I don't exactly remember what my wife was telling me about the phone… is it dead? She must have been waiting for me for a long time now; I drive my car forward cautiously.

Someone is standing next to the banyan tree by the bridge. Who is it? It must be someone. I don't think it prudent to stop the car. I have moved forward but is the shadow of the individual moving along or is it someone else? It could be someone in desperate need, it could be a robber. But what do I have that would interest a thief? The second-hand car, my wrist watch that I got at my wedding, my cellphone that keeps shutting down, or the two thousand rupees in my wallet that seems to fly away faster than I can keep a track. Or is he after my life? I have heard many people from the city being victims of robberies in this particular place. I move my car forward and then abruptly stop. There's a teacher in me after all. Once a teacher, always a teacher. It is often hard for professionals to discern when the profession subsumes life itself. I shift the things on the seat beside me to the back of the car. During the surprise inspection in school earlier today, the clerk had hurriedly kept the incomplete files in my car. The attendance registers and a few other documents were also kept along with the files. If I forget the register at home, the entire next week will be spoiled. This is a needless hassle.

I opened the door to the empty seat beside me and allowed the shadow to enter. As soon as he takes the seat, I move the car forward. I pretended to be nonchalant to the other person as if offering lifts to strangers in the darkness was routine for me.

"It will be really kind of you to drop me at the next valley."

The man was speaking and I tried to gauge him from his voice. He appeared to be a man of work, an Adivasi who was aware of the ways of the city.

"What were you doing there in such darkness?"

I merely ask this question to have a normal conversation. I feel better at having company in the midst of this forest. He answers my question with a question himself, with a degree of familiarity as if he knows me quite well,

"You are late today, masterji?"

"Yes, today… do you know me?" —saying this I wonder at the redundancy of my question; of course, everyone knows school teachers in such a small place.

"The child that you helped to get admitted to the hospital the other day, Jugnu, I am his father."

"Oh, alright." Accepting his gratitude, I began to think about the events of that day. While taking my usual evening stroll, I saw the tribesmen pressing the neck of a small boy deep into the mud and

dung. He was my student. On moving closer, I found out that the boy had been electrocuted and the simple-minded, illiterate locals tried to keep him stable by putting his head to the ground, waiting for the arrival of a witch doctor for treatment.

"He will die this way. Take him out of the mud immediately. I am getting my car. Hurry."

I had scolded the group as if all of them were my students. They hurriedly placed the child in the back of my car and an old tribeswoman sat beside him.

"Is there no one else with him?"

"Just his grandmother, sir—Bansakhiya Bau."

"Alright."

I took the grandmother and her grandchild to the hospital where, fortunately for the child, a nurse was present; otherwise, the officers in these government buildings vanish as easily as wheels from a car. Before returning I gave the old grandmother, Bansakhiya, two hundred rupees. After reaching the school I asked the caretaker to wash my car which was full of mud and dung. They didn't think the matter was significant enough to inform other people. I kept thinking about how desperately the place and the people needed more teachers. And I had forgotten about this matter, but today, while the boy's father is sitting right beside me, I ask,

"Where were you at that time?"

"I was there."

I thought to myself that perhaps he had gone to get some help and by the time, I had reached out to help the grandmother and her grandchild, he didn't approach me with hesitation. Whatever it was, I ask,

"How is the child now?"

"You have saved him." He says with folded hands.

I keep driving in silence. I am stressed as usual. My wife will start the same topic of my transfer as soon as I reach home.

"You will receive your transfer, masterji." The man next to me says.

"Has anyone in the village said that I am trying for a transfer?"

I feel both angry with myself and upset. I often listen to stories from the old caretaker by the fire after school, and talk about myself as well. I have never considered what a tattle-tale the old caretaker could be.

"Anyone who comes here wants a transfer."

"Yes."

"You will get your transfer as well."

"Yes, it will happen some time or other."

"I firmly believe that once you reach home today, you will find the letter on your table."

I laugh at his words; this simple Adivasi is giving me such good wishes just because I helped his child out.

"Should it happen as you say, I will give thrice my salary…"

As soon as these words come out of my mouth, I stop; how can a teacher speak this way! Only God will understand under what circumstances I had bribed my brother-in-law's friend, a middleman.

"But masterji…" He tells me.

"If every masterji takes a transfer and leaves this place, who will teach our children?"

How do I answer this question; it feels as if someone has spoken in the voice of my conscience. I keep driving steadily, keeping my eyes fixed on the roads of the jungle. Fireflies light tiny splashes of darkness; I hear the sounds of animals nearby. The air carries the intoxicating smell of roots and herbs that can even bring the dead to life. How far does my complicated life allow me to get outside to experience this ancient beauty! Even so, I am after all a part of all of this.

"Look out."

There seems to be something dead lying in front of the car.

"No, don't stop the car."

He says that in such a cold voice that I don't stop the car even though I am almost about to; I become suddenly agitated.

"Could that have been an accident? He might be alive. Shouldn't we stop?" I don't know why I am asking this stranger everything.

"That was nothing. Keep driving."

"Was that an animal then?"

"It was an illusion."

I become absolutely quiet.

When we reached the opening to the valley, he says,

"Please stop here."

"Where will you go from here in such darkness?"

I have heard the old caretaker talk of many old legends about this particular isolated valley, stories that I have often dismissed as local folklore.

I cannot stop myself from asking. He is looking in all directions, and says with worry creeping into his voice, like one who cares for me:

"You had better leave immediately. Go absolutely straight on the road. Do not stop."

I make my way forward along the highway. Where will he go in such darkness?

My colleague Anandnath accompanied me one Saturday and he kept referring to scary stories. When we had stopped for some tea at a kiosk near the bridge, he said that ghosts often roam the area all the way to the forest and that there was a hidden village populated by

ghosts somewhere nearby. I pointed out a makeshift path leading away from the highway. Of course, there must be some denizens living in the deep forest. Why would ghosts need pathways? But Anandnath clung so obstinately to his argument that I resigned midway. He said that just the dirt road was visible, never a village, never any villagers, even the shepherds who would lose their way, never made it back from that place.

Thinking about all this has made me stressed. I drive with extra caution. I am relieved to see the bright lights of my city and all worry leaves me by the time I reach home.

"These letters have come for you. Have a look. I am setting the plates for dinner."

I go through the letters and see a government envelope which takes my breath away for a second or two. I have guessed correctly—it is the order letter for my transfer. I am really shocked; how can someone be so accurate in his prediction?

I pull myself up somehow. Do I tell my wife? I recall the words of Jugnu's father,

"If all teachers leave, who will teach our children?"

I should be happy, why does my heart feel unbearably heavy? Why am I considering cancelling my transfer?

"You are still sitting in this condition? Please wash your face and hands."

My wife stands in front of me with a glass of water but I feel uncomfortable in her presence.

"I ought to get the stuff from my car."

I lift the laptop bag from the backseat when I glance at the files. I take the attendance register and come inside. I don't know what prompts me to look for the name of my student's father. What was the name of the child that he had said—Jugnu?

I turn the pages. I come to the list of the students of class three where I spot Jugnu Pardhi's name. There are three students by this name; the first one's father is late Parvat Pardhi, the second is Cheeta Pardhi, and the third child's father is called late Meghraj Pardhi.

Now I wonder if it was Cheeta Pardhi whom I met today; what was he doing in the valley next to the bridge in such darkness?

Translated by Rituparna Mukherjee

Bottled Water

The satisfaction of accomplishing a task can be as invigorating as fulfilling a deep desire.

No, I'm not an expert thief! Neither am I someone desperate for money nor a wealthy individual with kleptomaniac tendencies. I am an engineering student, the "good child" of my father, who took a loan from the bank to pay for my college fees. Growing up in a lower-middle-class household, I didn't have the luxury to indulge in mischievous activities, so I had to be virtuous! Ha ha! And I am virtuous—hardworking, mature, and educated!

Walking through the vast parking lot of Satpura. If Vallabh Bhavan in Bhopal is considered the administrative heart of Madhya Pradesh, then Satpura Bhavan is the lifeblood pulsing with the colours of the administration. A friend of mine had to come here out of necessity, and I came along not as an invited guest, but as an obliging companion. Truth be told, my friend had come here to borrow my motorcycle, and my life's savings, accumulated by my father and my mother, had gone into buying this second-hand bike. How could I let go of this precious possession so easily? But if I had said 'no,' I would probably have severed ties with an old friendship. So, I had to reluctantly agree and now find myself waiting in the parking lot, eyes wide open like an owl, passing the time looking here and there.

And here I am. There are long queues of vehicles, resembling vibrant and colourful lines drawn with wax pencils! Girls' scooters in their favourite shades of red, pink, and orange; stylish, black bikes for the youth; sparkling cycles for the humble class IV children; worn-out scooters for the clerks; tiny cars for junior officers that looked like toys; long cars with yellow crowns for senior officers; rugged jeeps for authoritative visitors… Every vehicle represents a symphony that tells the story of its owner's life!

And this place resembles less of a parking lot and more of a government-owned sanctuary. Beneath the towering old trees, there are broad terraces where many individuals, mostly workers taking their official after-lunch break, engage in card games. People come and go in abundance, each face telling a unique tale. The slender young trees sway gracefully in even the gentlest breeze, seemingly celebrating their youth. Indeed, being young itself is a remarkable achievement. The wide paths are adorned with rows of vibrant, delicate flowers and ornamental plants. Vines with blossoming flowers cascade over the railings, enveloping the atmosphere of Satpura in a fragrant embrace, as gentle as the smile of a beautiful working woman.

As I park the motorcycle, I notice a thin layer of dust covering the

floor in glistening golden hues, illuminated by the radiant afternoon sun. I begin walking aimlessly upon the dust, reminiscent of crushed gold. There is no particular thought occupying my mind. I wander with a carefree spirit, observing my surroundings: a young bird nestled on a peepul branch, buds partially unfurled with a curious black bee hovering nearby, a solitary butterfly engrossed in its graceful flight, an apprehensive yet hopeful farmer entering with a determined expression, a weary security guard, and a shy girl engrossed in her cell-phone conversation. Oh, what a delightful moment! Even if my friends don't emerge for another two hours, I am content. Waiting never bores me; I am never truly alone. I wholeheartedly embrace Simone de Beauvoir's wisdom that celebrating one's authentic self is a true joy!

Now, in this moment of celebration, there may not be any accompanying music, but I hum my favourite song nonetheless...

Somewhere a girl, very beautiful but dark like...

Wait! No, my attention is captivated by a stunning car, glistening in a shade of grey so fresh that it appears as though the first service may not have been performed yet. The brand-new luxury vehicle gleams in the shimmering sunlight, resembling an elite bride donning a grey lehenga at a wedding reception, her diamond-studded jewellery intermittently sparkling. Drawn to its allure, I approach the car. However, my gaze does not fall upon the plush seats behind the transparent glass; instead, it is fixated on the two sealed bottles of branded mineral water resting upon them.

Seeing the precious water, a flood of memories overwhelms me. In our township, where the municipal corporation often neglects to provide water as soon as summer arrives, a chaotic scene unfolds when the water tanker arrives. People, desperate for water, forego washing clothes or bathing and scramble on their hands and feet to collect every precious drop.

Amidst this chaos, I witnessed a disturbing incident. While the water supplier was distributing water, he took advantage of the situation and made inappropriate advances towards a young woman, touching her inappropriately.

That night, as I was returning from a friend's house, I stumbled upon a scene that shook me to the core. I found people stealing water from the drinking water tank placed at the entrance of an affluent colony. Among them were men, women, and children shivering with fear, desperately collecting water in dirty plastic bottles and broken utensils. These were nomadic laborers living in makeshift shelters made of foil tarpaulin pieces and dilapidated structures, their lives worth far less than the cost of their rundown dwellings. As the colony guard shouted insults and curses, a small child, barely five or six years

old, lagged behind the scrambling adults, wearing nothing but underwear on his emaciated body. The child stumbled and blood started trickling from his mouth, but he clung to the water container, determined not to let it go. The guard relentlessly pursued, abusing and striking the child with a stick. The child, bloodied and terrified, continued to run, crossing the road from the gate of the posh colony to the garbage dump on the other side. At that moment, I witnessed not only the painful divide between the thirsty and life-saving water but also the stark contrast between privilege and suffering.

In another incident, an entire village fell ill after consuming contaminated water. Several people lost their lives, and others were in critical condition. The village had made numerous complaints about the non-functional handpumps, and the sole well had never been officially cleaned. The lack of proper drinking water arrangements in this village, which was a part of the capital city, proved disastrous. The reasons behind this travesty? Negligence, incompetence, and apathy!

Before my eyes, I see sparkling mineral water bottles resting in the luxurious car. The necessity to endure unwanted touch and invasion of personal space juxtaposed with the grim reality of drinking impure water. It is a painful reminder of the gaping divide between the haves and have-nots. And there, the car owner has two bottles lying unused, their purpose wasted.

Anger surges within me, and I yearn to strike the car window with all my might. But as a product of my lower-middle-class upbringing, I am not afforded the luxury of rebellion. So, my forceful punch transforms into a hesitant touch as I lightly graze the car door.

However, to my surprise, the car door is unlocked. Accidentally opening it, I quickly close it and hastily retreat. Beads of sweat form on my forehead. What if someone has seen me? They may have mistaken my intention and thought I was attempting to steal from the car!

As I continue walking, I can't resist stealing glances back. A man has two bottles, twice the amount of water one will need. What if I take just one bottle? The mere thought escalates my heartbeat and intensifies my breath. My palms grow clammy as my world echoes with the sound of my racing heart.

Lub-dub... lub-dub...

No, they…! What a useless thought! I return to my bike, my restlessness growing with each passing moment. The rush of blood through my veins accelerates. Lost in my aimlessness, I find myself drawn back to the car once again.

No!!

Suddenly, someone interrupts me from my inner musings, although I

haven't even formed a clear intention yet. It's fascinating how the soul can grasp us at such subtle levels, akin to a mother sensing her child's predicament just by looking at their face. Is the mother our soul, or perhaps our soul is a fragment of the mother's soul! ... While my conscience scolds me, I try to recall if I've ever stolen anything in the past twenty-one years of my life. Any previous theft? No, there is no real or imagined memory. Maybe I've never committed theft, but I have certainly lied a few times, and every time those lies turned into shameless crimes.

Once, when I desired to take money from my mother, money other than my regular allowance, I fabricated a story about a new college fee fund, intending to spend it with my friends. Later, I discovered that my mother had saved that money for a long time to buy me a new sweater for the upcoming winter.

On another occasion, I didn't want to lend my bike to a friend, so I resorted to making excuses about mechanical faults or visiting relatives. Eventually, he somehow found out the truth, and our friendship, painstakingly built over the years, crumbled to ashes in mere moments.

There was an incident from my school days when my father discovered my truancy. I pretended to have a fever by placing an onion under my armpit, and I spent a day or two lying in bed. However, when my father rolled his sleeves and expressed his disappointment, I felt so ashamed that I confessed everything to him. Many years have passed since that lie, and now I'm contemplating theft?

Let me think!

No!

Let's consider!

No!

Let's contemplate!

I find myself in a dilemma, not indulging too much in the dialectics of morality versus immorality, sin versus virtue, good versus bad. I have my own noose of life, and in the end, I only do what resonates within me, avoiding anything that triggers inner prohibitions. I believe in living a simple life, knowing that dishonesty eventually leads to complications. These beautiful experiences have already taught me this much.

…But this desire to steal! Perhaps life transcends all philosophies! Despite my inner fear, I remain near the car, for all courage ultimately stems from the deepest form of fear. I scan my surroundings, cautiously checking if anyone is observing me.

Two or three workers pass by me with empty lunch boxes and smiles. As I watch, one guard strolls towards another, casually

smoking a beedi. A distraught man struggles with a scooter that refuses to start. It feels as though the people around me, in their comings and goings, are lost in their own thoughts, gazing into the void. The troubled man seems disconnected from his surroundings, like a meditative yogi.

No one pays me any attention except for the invisible presence within me. My inner self in conflict with my desires, creates a whirlwind of emotions. The fear of being watched convinces me that the next fear awaits me just ahead. What if someone catches me stealing? What if the owner of the car suddenly appears and catches me red-handed?

The mere thought sends shivers down my spine. A voice from within screams, contradicting my fears, and mocking the so-called elite class.

In that moment, excitement surges through me, clouding my judgment. I impulsively open the door, grab a bottle, and swiftly close it again. The entire act takes no more than five to eight seconds, during which time my heart seems to stop beating, my breath vanishes, and the adrenaline of impending danger courses through my veins. I have just committed my first theft, overcome by a sense of imminent death. Clutching the stolen bottle tightly, I move away from the scene with quick, unsteady steps, feeling like a survivor. My mind remains numb, struggling to process the events. I find myself wanting to close my eyes, seeking solace in darkness.

After a few moments of strange emptiness, I regain my senses. Suddenly, the weight of guilt descends upon me, causing my head to bow in shame, just like Papa's "good child." Blood pulsates through my arteries, carrying a mix of life and death. Something inside me seems broken, a part of my upbringing or an invisible sacred bond. Guilt is not alone; fear accompanies it, changing its hue. I feel as though the entire world is staring at the mineral bottle in my hand mockingly, with hateful eyes. Are the security guards laughing at me amidst their smoke? Are the employees whispering about me while playing cards on that platform? Whose number is that man dialling on his cell phone? Has he witnessed my theft? And what about my friend, the one I notice among the crowd?

As soon as I see my friend, a shudder runs through me. He will be returning soon, and he will surely uncover everything! No matter how much I insist that I have bought the bottle, he will wipe away my feeble lies with a single glance. I will have no convincing falsehood left to tell. Or perhaps he will simply see through me at first sight. Then my closest friends will come to know, followed by my college friends, my parents, my relatives, and finally, my girlfriend, who idolizes me like Ram.

Even in the cool afternoon sun, I feel beads of sweat forming on my

forehead. The thrill of stealing has transformed into a death-like guilt. My friend is on his way, and I am restless. The inner voices that faded into lunacy have now returned, sharp as ever, like piercing weapons.

"Put the bottle back! Go on, do it now!"

I wrestle with the compulsion to obey, cursing the wretchedness of addiction and the excessive indulgences of the privileged class.

"No! I will not return the bottle!" I resolve, even as my friend draws closer.

And now?

In the twilight of my mind, as I walk out of the campus, my surroundings come alive with vibrant sensations. People, flowers, butterflies, vines, and trees all seem to emanate a charm reminiscent of beloved bedtime tales. I realize that beauty was not an external quality, but rather a state of mind.

Just then, a beggar appears before me, dispelling the fog in my thoughts. I observe the middle-aged man carefully contemplating what India has bestowed upon its citizens, taking away the entirety of his life: tattered clothes, cracked and bloody soles, unkempt hair, a dirty face, a scruffy beard, hungry eyes, and a frail body. The beggar, who looks fifty at the age of forty after a lifetime of struggle, beseeches me with pleading eyes. Witnessing the indignity he faces, my heart aches.

It strikes me that this man has in all likelihood consumed poor quality water throughout his life. Moved by compassion, I swiftly hand him the stolen bottle, my expression firm and devoid of mercy.

"Leave this place immediately!" I command.

The speechless beggar understands little beyond his own self-interest, and he promptly flees. And at this moment, a sense of relief washes over me, as if I have shed the burden of fear, doubt, and confusion that has been surrounding me.

…Let me forget that I ever stole.

Translated by Anuradha Dosad

Goat

Anita leaves her goat to graze on reaching the Balmi Hill and sits next to a large rock amidst the mound of rocks. There was a hail storm last night and harsh, cold winds have been blowing since morning. But where does Anita have the comfort of a warm shawl? She sleeps with two bedclothes at night and in the morning wraps herself in them to keep warm. She is wearing two torn shirts underneath the bedspread. The shirts belong to her farmer brothers living next to her. Her poor mother can only extend this limited help to her widowed and fatherless daughter.

She looks all around her. Everything is wet—the leaves, the bushes, the branches and the grass. She will not be able to light a fire. She looks at the red, glowing, bulb-like sun at a distance as if by merely staring at it her cold and damp muscles would get a semblance of warmth.

She calls out to her seven-year-old daughter, walking in a school uniform, in the direction of the rising sun—

'Did you keep the flatbreads in your box?'

'Not a box Amma, it's tiffin.'

'Ah, yes, that. Don't forget to pray to the God Madiya on your way.'

Her daughter moves ahead. Anita returns to the stones with habitual worry on her face. It is not a very safe time for girls—she thinks, scared, looking at the empty road ahead of her. But the world has always been bad for the girls! Thinking this, she says to herself—

'Amma never allowed me to go to the school in the village at the foot of the hills. If I had some education, I would have been able to at least open a grocery shop or sell something going from door to door. Every form of job requires some education and education only comes from school.'

'What are you mumbling by yourself?'

Jamuniya leaves her three goats next to Anita's, rubs both her hands and sits next to Anita.

'It's really cold today" —she covers half her face with her torn shawl.

'Let the day progress some more, the winds will quell and we will be able to light a fire' —Anita collects some twigs and branches and keeps them on the stone.

'And even if the winds don't stop, we will have to pass the day somehow!'

Sitting on the rocks, Jamuniya stares at the goats. Anita's goat is of a slightly better breed and is grazing with her three lambs. It is pregnant.

'Will your goat give birth by the full moon?'

‘Hopefully. May the God Madiya protect her.’

Anita considers the small stack of bricks, Madiya, formed in the forest next to the hillside village, her protector. She calls out to her God quietly in her mind— ‘Lord! Protect this treasure of life—my school-going daughter and my precious goat grazing in the front.’

‘Only you have a goat of such good breed in the entire village.’

‘I have only been able to get her by selling my silver necklet, Bhabhi. It was my last piece of jewelry.’

‘When you have sold your silver, don’t worry, you will soon see better days. Mark my words—within a year you mother and daughter will have better clothes on your back and your household will have wheat and lentils.’

Jamuniya Bhabhi says such good words! That is why Anita always shares everything with her.

‘I am going to sell the lambs that she births in the market at Bhopal on Eid. Then I will keep a buck. I just hope this year passes by somehow for us mother and daughter.’

‘Your brothers have been really unkind to you. Between the two of them, they own ten bighas of your ancestral farmland. But they didn’t even give one bigha land to you, their widowed sister! And your mother! She is an enemy of her own daughter!’

‘No Bhabhi, at least I have been able to put up a makeshift cottage next to their house because of Amma. She sometimes brings a handful of grains or sugar hiding from my sisters-in-law. I ask her not to do that.’

‘Well, what else can the poor old widow do? She herself suffers from a lack of food under the lordship of her two daughters-in-law. A woman is only worth something in the presence of her husband.’

Anita recalls her own husband. Her in-law’s family was large and farming wasn’t enough to sustain all of them. So, her husband had gone to work as a stone crusher. Working with stones regularly for three-four years had damaged his lungs, they were full of stone remnants. She got neither support nor financial help from her in-laws for her husband’s treatment. She spent three months at a government hospital looking after her ill husband. It was a hellish life there, especially with her young daughter. She couldn’t get a bed for her husband in the hospital. She lay her husband in the general ward spreading a bedcover in one corner. Sometimes the doctor would come. She would get the medicines at times, and would be refused other times. She had survived there with much difficulty amidst the rebuke of the nurses and the ill-intentioned cleaners so that her breadwinner could survive. But alas God Madiya! His death was her life’s most unfortunate memory. The district hospital had not even provided her with an ambulance to take her husband’s corpse home.

Anita had carried her husband's corpse on her shoulders alone and clutching her daughter's wrist firmly, she had walked fifteen kilometers to her husband's home. She was kicked out of that house on the thirteenth day of her husband's death. What place did a widow's daughter have in their property?

The sun is brighter now. Jamuniya and Anita have gathered twigs and dried leaves and made a fire.

'Your daughter has started going to school as soon as she came here. You have also built your cottage. Are you being able to manage things well?'

'I had a heavy copper water container and a pair of small anklets. I also had a brass platter. I sold them all the day before yesterday and purchased groceries from the village market. We have food provisions for a few days. I hope I get some payment for labor work by that time.'

'What kind of labor work?'

'Why are you joking, Bhabhi? The two of us had worked together on the Panchayat drainage work. Did you get your payment? When I went yesterday the Sarpanch told me that the government does not have money at present and asked me to come three days later when the government would send him some money.'

'You must have come to graze goats while it was still dark. Everyone in the village knew about this as soon as the day broke. Don't you know what has happened?'

'What?'

'Both the Sarpanch and his secretary have fled.'

'What?'

'Yes, they took money from the government to construct toilets in every mud house and concrete house in the village and kept it for themselves. We heard that the police were supposed to arrest them today, which is why they fled while it was still dark.'

'What about our payment now?'—Anita's eyes fill with tears.

Jamuniya thinks of asking Anita to forget about the money but she cannot bring herself to say it.

Anita opens a piece of cloth while warming herself in the fire. She had brought one of last night's stale flatbread with her and kept two for her daughter—one that she would have eaten in the morning and the other taken to school.

Warmed by the fire, Anita eats her flatbread in silence. Jamuniya hands over a slice of onion and some pickle to Anita from her lunch box. Anita eats that quietly.

'Anita, dear, would you mind the goats for a while? I will come back shortly after finishing some chores.'

Jamuniya leaves. Anita knows that she won't return until late

afternoon. People collect the value of even a slice of onion and some pickle!

The goats are grazing. There is no one around. Anita gets up on the peepul tree near her and starts collecting leaves. No one should see her. Why can't women climb trees? At least women like her should be free of these restrictions because their goats feel hungry at night. Anita collects leaves quickly and starts throwing them on the sheet spread underneath. She will collect her goat's fodder for the night and keep them tied in the sheet before any shepherd comes this way. As soon as she gets some money, she will buy a sickle so that she won't have to climb the peepul. She will be able to cut branches from the babul and berry bushes, and bring them home.

Anita is lost in her thoughts of peepul leaves and sickle and she is unaware of the warnings that the environment gives when a predator is around.

Suddenly the air around her is suffused with the noise of the bleating goats. She can't hear her own goat's scream from among them. When she looks down from the tree, she sees a leopard already grabbing hold of her goat's neck.

Anita jumps down from the tree in half a moment— 'Oh my goat!'

She pulls the leopard by its waist and with all her strength throws it to one side. It falls on the stones.

Anita hugged her goat. No! The wounds are not deep. She will live!

While she is inspecting the wounds, the leopard comes and grabs hold of her goat's rear side in its paws. Its claws dig into the goat's pregnant stomach and it screams in a death-like voice.

'You animal!' Anita grabs the leopard by its neck with one of her hands and pushes it away with her other hand. In trying to get away, the goat slips and falls. Anita shields it and stands in front of the leopard; she has both her life and her life's investment on the line.

The hungry leopard jumps at them again, but now its prey is not the goat but its owner.

Anita falls with the impact. The leopard grabs hold of her shirt collar. Its claws and teeth could not reach her skin properly through the two layers of shirt and Anita again pushed it away with all her might. The leopard has torn bits of the shirt in its mouth. Its prey's neck is now fully open for it to sink its teeth. Anita throws a stone at the animal that hits its jaw but the leopard neither flinches nor does it remove its eyes from her.

The leopard lunges at Anita with its final assault. While the animal tries its best to sink its claws and teeth into her neck, she kicks and punches it with all her might. …And at a distance, in the school, her daughter is studying—her daughter who has no one in this world other than Anita.

Two…four…seven… the leopard falls to one side with the eighth punch. Its face bleeds profusely. And before the hunter can regain its senses, the prey gets a hold of herself. Anita picks up a burning branch that she had used a while back to light a fire.

The other shepherds are running towards her.

The wounded goat stumbles and then manages to stand upright.

The bleeding leopard runs towards the forest, and Anita runs after it brandishing the burning branch in her hand.

Translated by Rituparna Mukherjee

Jaggery Nuggets

Ten-year-old Payal is joyfully skipping rope with her friends in the scorching heat of Khaprail village, where the red soil creates tiny dust whirlpools. It seems as if even the dust is captivated by the sight of these little girls playing, standing still as spectators.

"Ninety-seventh, ninety-eighth, ninety-nine..."

Amidst the girls twirling the rope, Payal jumps with both feet on the ground or soars high in the air!

"You mischievous Payal! I knew I would find you here!"

As soon as Mother Rukmini grabs hold of Payal's braid, her friends scatter away. Ruby, Sadhana, Aarti—they all need to return home and start working, or else they'll face the same fate.

Rukmini's anger, even after delivering five slaps, refuses to subside —who is the target of her wrath?

She pushes Payal towards a heap of cow dung in the courtyard. Payal manages to avoid falling face-first into the filth.

"If you try to escape from home without spreading cow dung all over the courtyard, it will be either you or me today!"

Wiping away her tears and running her hands through her hair, Payal begins kneading straw into the cow dung to cover the courtyard. Meanwhile, Rukmini picks up her ten-month-old son, Lalla, who cries incessantly in his crib, and holds him close, pleading with him. Her breasts are dry, lacking the nourishing milk Lalla craves.

Lalla, with his newly erupted teeth, suckles vigorously, causing Rukmini great pain. She reluctantly separates him from herself.

"My precious child! What can I feed you?"

Rukmini is devastated by her son's continuous cries. She carefully retrieves the milk she had hidden away in a nook above. Dissolving jaggery in the milk, she fills a bowl and starts feeding Lalla with a spoon. The child eagerly drinks the milk, and the relieved mother can finally take her eyes off him.

"Mother?"

Peeking through the closet door, four-and-a-half-year-old Deepa calls out in a frightened voice. She has learned from her elder sister Payal to keep a safe distance from Amma when talking, knowing that she can avoid her mother's beatings by staying out of reach. Although Amma's pale yellow fingers strike anyone within her grasp, Deepa has learned that after running for ten or twenty steps, Amma begins to pant, making her escape possible. This is her little understanding of life!

"What's the matter?"

"Mama, I'm hungry!"

"But you just ate bread an hour ago!"

Deepa remains silent like a guilty criminal, but her eyes reveal her hunger. Rukmini becomes irritated by this pleading look.

"Enough! Finish eating!"

Deepa rushes to the square, grabbing a roti from the bamboo basket covered with a piece of dhoti. She sits down and hungrily devours the thick roti, stealing glances at Amma's face every now and then, fearful of her reaction. She can't even escape from this place. Whether it's the lump in her throat or the impact of her mother's weary eyes, tears silently fill Deepa's eyes as she eats the roti. At just four and a half years old, Deepa resembles a wrinkle on her mother's forehead.

"Go, drink water and eat the bread with curry from the plate."

Mother's words carry a soft yet perennially distant tone. Deepa runs to the nearby stream to drink water. With dishevelled hair, a dirty frock, and dusty hands and feet, Deepa cups her hands together to drink water. Payal is still busy coating the courtyard with cow dung. Rukmini heaves a sigh of relief as she observes her two daughters. At least she managed to deal with her elder daughter, Sandhya, who got married four months ago in a community ceremony. Sandhya, whose actual age of fifteen and a half was falsified as eighteen in the government documents, had her wedding go smoothly without any trouble. Lalla's father didn't spend a single penny on the entire wedding, and yet it didn't occur to him to buy a new dhoti for his daughter's marriage. The mean-spirited parents didn't even care enough to provide clothes to the newlywed couple as part of the customary ritual. Rukmini remained silent, consumed by guilt. During the *Kanyadan*, she wore a sari costing one hundred fifty rupees, secretly saved from the peddler, while Lalla's father wore a white kurta-pyjama. Rukmini vividly remembers all the things Sandhya received as donations from the government and the wealthy families—a sewing machine, a bed, a wardrobe, an iron press, sarees, silver anklets, a pressure cooker, kitchen utensils, and that gas stove! Bitterness fills Rukmini's heart as she recalls the gas stove. When the time came to bid farewell, she had taken the gas stove and placed it on the tractor trolley heading home. However, Sandhya, the bride of fifteen and a half years, lifted her veil and interrupted her in front of the gathering.

"Hey Amma! Return our gas stove."

This display of audacity filled the elders on Sandhya's in-laws' side with pride, believing that the bride would remain loyal to her new family. Rukmini's intentions were crushed. Her ungrateful daughter couldn't even spare her poor mother the gift of the gas stove. Was she raised and nurtured for this day? She will never step foot on her mother's doorstep again! Rukmini swears never to send bundles or rags on any occasion, only then will the true worth of parents be

recognized! May she forever remain a slave in her in-laws' house!

…There is nothing so precious in this house that it can be sent with the daughter to her in-laws' house!

Fatigued, Rukmini reminisces about her elder daughter, who used to handle all the household chores. But along with the memories comes anger. And as she looks at these two girls in front of her, the anger continues to burn inside. Turning away from her daughters, she shifts her gaze to Lalla, who has consumed so much milk that he now spits it out. After Deepa's birth, Rukmini had to endure three more pregnancies, resorting to selling her precious ornaments each time to undergo abortions. The weight of these actions has tarnished her reputation in the eyes of the villagers, who shamelessly gossip about the five unborn girls who lost their lives within the walls of her home. To them, even consuming the water from this house is considered a sin!

"Mother?"

Now Payal peeks through the door, maintaining the same distant stance, ready to flee if necessary.

"Is the courtyard covered?"

"It's time for school, I will return and coat."

"It's not the time to play and be mischievous. Don't go to school today, first cover the entire courtyard, and then you can fetch water." Rukmini's voice carries a tone of authority. She throws a bundle of grass into the courtyard, ties the old cow under the shed, and finally, the homeowner settles down on the platform, ready to relax.

The master of the house has returned. With a joyful heart, Rukmini sits by the door of the chamber, cradling Lalla in her lap. Her husband had left early in the morning with the cow, and now they have both returned. The cow has grazed on abundant grass, ensuring enough food for its next meals. Rukmini feels a sense of pride in her ability to give birth to a son. Since Lalla's arrival, the eyes of the once wayward and intoxicated husband have opened. Over the past ten years, he had squandered their wealth in gambling and drug use, leaving them with only seven bighas of land after selling off twenty.

"Why aren't you going to fetch water today? Did you apply henna on your feet?" Ramprakash remarks, lighting a beedi. Rukmini deems it wise to remain silent, knowing that any sharp retort will only lead to a series of slaps.

"This beedi is tasteless. Bring the chillum and fill it up," Ramprakash demands. Rukmini quickly fills the pipe and hands it to him.

"I have to go to the farm. Who will take care of Lalla?" Rukmini questions.

"Put your son here on the platform. First, fetch water, and then go

to the field. Don't worry about our son," Ramprakash reassures her.

"You will be disturbed unnecessarily. Why does this girl insist on going to school every day? What will she do there other than avoiding household chores and causing a ruckus with the boys?" Rukmini expresses her disapproval.

"What will she do there? You illiterate fool! How would you know that one must attend school every day? The teacher takes attendance, and she'll be punished if she's absent. Now go and fetch water!" Ramprakash retorts. Ramprakash had never experienced the privilege of attending school, but he knows the benefits of education—food is available at school, one set of uniforms per year, access to books, and an annual stipend! This year, he used his daughter's two thousand rupees stipend to buy himself two new pairs of kurta-pyjamas, along with a sieve, towel, and plastic shoes. Since then, this wicked woman has turned against their daughter attending school.

As Rukmini heads to fetch water with a pot, Ramprakash tells her, "If our daughter receives a scholarship next year, you can buy yourself a pair of dhotis."

"Huh! Worn-out dhotis from her stipend! Some happiness your elder daughter brought us, and this one is even more ambitious," Rukmini grumbles, her bony body carrying two large jugs that need to be filled multiple times.

"Deepa, take your brother with you," she instructs, calling upon her youngest daughter to look after Lalla.

Ramprakash takes a deep, ragged breath, exhaling a cloud of smoke as he draws on the chillum. Gathering his strength, he steps out towards the courtyard.

In the midst of this, Payal swiftly takes a bath and dons her school uniform. She skilfully braids her hair into two neat plaits, then emerges with a bag of books in her hand. As she embarks on the unpaved road, she moves with the grace and swiftness of a bird taking flight, yearning to soar high in the sky. Payal's love for school is so immense that even when she is away, her thoughts are consumed by it. Every single day when the school gates open, Payal makes it a point to attend, even if she faces punishment at home for doing so.

She recognizes the importance of personal hygiene and cares for her well-being meticulously. Nails need to be trimmed, so Payal always keeps a half-blade wrapped in foil in her bag, not just for herself but also for Deepa. Brushing her teeth twice a day holds the same significance as eating food for Payal. Come rain or shine, she diligently bathes every day, all 365 days of the year, even if it rained hailstones from the sky. Clean clothes are a must, and Payal gathered wild roots from the nearby forest to wash her garments.

Everything Payal hears and learns in school resonates deeply within

her soul, becoming her guiding principles.

Classes commence beneath the sheltering trees. Of the three rooms of the village primary school, two are occupied by the sarpanch, while the third is filled with straw and used to house cattle. The only room remaining belongs to the school, serving multiple purposes such as the headmaster's office, stationery storage, mid-day meal kitchen, and the site where the national flag is hoisted on important days like 15th August and 26th January. Classes are conducted under the shade of the trees, where dogs and stray cattle roam freely. Apart from class time, students can be seen collecting cow dung from the grounds and carrying separate sheets along with their bags.

Payal finds her way to a hidden spot at the end of the row, joining the classroom under the tree. The teacher notices her presence while writing questions on the blackboard but chooses not to punish her by calling her out. This teacher is a disillusioned education worker who travels daily from the city to the village, taking a bus and riding a bicycle. Despite having a high-level education, he has only managed to secure an insecure, low-paying job, yet the competition for even such positions is fierce, with thousands of candidates vying for them. The teacher never misses a day of teaching.

With the question now written on the blackboard, the children diligently solve it in their notebooks. But what is Payal doing at the back? The teacher's frustration with his students begins to surface. She arrived late and is now playing in the dust. The entire class is engrossed in problem-solving. The teacher approaches silently, clutching a green birch in his hand.

"What are you doing?" he asks sternly.

Payal, lacking access to paper and pen or pencil, resorts to writing her rough work on the dusty ground using a stick. The teacher is aware of her circumstances, having witnessed her collecting discarded pieces of paper from the school premises during break time. She usually even salvages broken slate pencils thrown away by other children. Payal always uses the slate itself for her rough work. Today, it seems she doesn't even have that with her.

Payal stands silently, her eyes fixed on Sir as he stares ahead with a stick in his hand. The entire class has turned its gaze towards her, and she can feel their curious stares. Aware of the poverty that plagues her family, Payal keeps her head bowed, hoping to escape the attention.

"Yes, the answer is correct," Sir declares, marking a tick next to the solved question on the dusty chalkboard with green chalk. A sense of relief washes over Payal as she hears his words.

"Well done! Here's your prize!" Sir reaches into his pocket and takes out two pens, extending them towards her.

The final exams are just around the corner, and Payal dedicates

herself to her studies. Even when she isn't reading, her mind remains immersed in the world of books. The household chores often suffer under her hands, and she faces verbal and physical abuse from her mother, Amma. However, Payal's focus on her studies remains unwavering. In the darkness that surrounds her, a spark of light emanates from her passion for learning. The darkness concentrates around the light, and the light focuses on overcoming the darkness. Payal's dedication to her studies becomes her guiding force.

In the courtyard, lanterns illuminate the surroundings. After quickly finishing her meal, Payal returns to her spot near the lantern, opening her books and notebooks once again. Amma, before heading to the unfinished room on the roof to sleep, interrupts her and asks, "Payal, have you washed the utensils and put them away?"

"Tomorrow is the exam," Payal replies, her eyes fixed on her book, without lifting her head.

Payal's seriousness and determined expression bother Rukmini, but considering the late hour, she gulps down the blood that rushes to her throat. She reminds Payal to join her soon before making her way to the room. She has to ensure Lalla, her youngest child, is asleep. If Payal is beaten at this hour, Rukmini worries that her husband might become angry, and the neighbours, upon hearing the commotion, will condemn him tomorrow.

Gritting her teeth, Rukmini sits down to clean the utensils with ashes and a rope mop in her hands. "You should become a collector with all this studying!" she mutters bitterly.

"You'll see, Amma. I will become a collector," Payal responds with determination.

Enraged, Rukmini lashes out, "You audacious girl! How dare you argue with me! Such behaviour doesn't suit a girl. Remember my words; if they prove false, your husband will beat you with shoes!"

"But, Amma, why do you consider your husband rich? Isn't the owner of livestock called 'rich'?" Payal's question leaves Rukmini speechless, unable to come up with an answer. She wants to finish washing the utensils and head upstairs to the room, afraid that her husband might fall asleep.

"Mother?" Little Deepa clings to her mother's dhoti as they climb the stairs, as she does every night.

"Amma, can I sleep with you? Just tonight, Amma!" Deepa's voice and the pleading in her eyes catch Rukmini's attention. From above, the sound of her husband's cough indicates his impatience. This is the final warning. Rukmini clenches the edge of her dhoti tightly, feeling a sense of helplessness, and ascends the stairs.

"Sister, let's go into the chamber. I'm scared to be alone," Deepa whispers.

“You bring your pillow and sleep here,” she says, gesturing towards the spot. She can’t take her eyes off the book.

Deepa obediently drags her cushion and pillow to the courtyard.

“Sister!”

“What is it now?”

“I can’t fall asleep.”

“Well, then start reading.”

Assuming the role of a teacher, the ten-year-old sister assigns her four-and-a-half-year-old sister the task of writing the alphabet on the slate. After some time spent in writing and painting, Deepa drifts off to sleep with her head on her sister’s lap. She isn’t just a sister to Deepa; she is like a mother.

It is probably past midnight. The boundless darkness of the sky watches over them. A faint glow illuminates the village courtyard.

A girl, engrossed in her reading, emits a radiance resembling a flickering lamp.

After massaging Lalla, Rukmini has now gone to prepare milk for him. She calls out from the chamber as soon as she spots Payal entering the courtyard after school.

“Go, feed the cow and take her to the hand pump for water, remember,” she instructs.

“Mother!”

Today, Payal stands silently in the courtyard, peeping through the chamber door. Crossing the ever-present fear, she gathers her courage and walks right up to Amma.

“What is it?”

“I got a tutoring job right away! After school, I have to teach the Sarpanch’s grandson for an hour behind his house!”

“What? How did you…?”

“I ranked first in the entire fifth grade.”

Rukmini has a piece of jaggery in her hand and contemplates whether to give it to her daughter.

Translated by Anuradha Dosad

Leap Second

Skuuchh. “The unyielding jaws of death gulp down yet another life, this time it is young and promising.”

Engineer Gulal, was working until three in the morning for a major government project in his newly set up office of a software company. He had prepared so meticulously for this project that he felt confident the company would definitely bag it.

“After this project, the company’s name will shine brightly. I will work so hard that people will applaud our work; they will seek out our company to get things done… In the next three years, I will repay the bank loan—it’s something I have to do! I will expand the staff, expand the business to prime locations in the city… No, all of this can wait; first, I need to make sure that Bini has all the funds she needs for her studies, then her marriage, and before that, Papa’s surgery—it requires immediate attention… This project means everything to me. I must get the project anyhow.!”

Thinking about all this, he cast one good look into the office before leaving for the day, rather night. Were the computers used by the staff turned off? Was the toilet light switched off? Did any tap remain open? The company operated from just two rooms. Six computers for six employees. In a corner, his personal cabin, formed from half a plank of plywood, consisted of a table, some chairs and a computer. A framed picture of Abdul Kalam adorned a wall. In the corner of the picture, a sticky slip carrying his handwriting declared,

‘Abdul Kalam sir says, “Harbour a big dream in your heart.”’

Before leaving for home, he spent a moment on this picture, and the line as a part of his office routine. Besides, if by chance, he happened to lay his eyes on it, he would at least look at it for a second. It was an office joke, “A leap second of the boss’s routine!” A second: a moment of life and yet transcending it. He smiled to himself and thought, “This leap second will make me a sensation in life; you will see!”

Twenty-five-year-old Gulal, like twenty-five leaps seconds off the Earth!

“Oh no! The window is ajar!”

Like a mischievous child, a gust of wind playfully entered the room and a computer screen or two beamed like a truant child with droplets like little teeth. As soon as he approached to close the window, another wet gust tousled his hair and splashed his face. The night outside was as beautiful as a veiled nymph. When all his responsibilities would be well taken care of, he would get married;

then there would be such drizzly nights, and one such a night someone would call his cell repeatedly. Someone at home will be waiting for him impatiently. A call, every hour! Each call, a cocktail of reprimands, requests and rosy complaints! … She must be waiting, wearing a pink ribbon in her loosened hair. A sweet drowsiness started to brew in his body even as the handsome engineer extended his hand outside to close the window.

Skuuchh. “The unyielding jaws fasten their grip on another life, this time it is young and promising.”

Something sharp penetrated the fingertips. Did a hornet sting? No, it was like the sting of a livewire!

In a split second, he pulled his hand inside, and a snake with its fangs tightly entrenched into his fingers flew inside the room! A Russell’s Viper?

His heart skipped a beat. Darkness flickered in his eyes for a moment. “No, Gulal!” –the defence mechanism of the body responded. He squeezed the snake’s head with his fist. With the other hand, he upturned the CD box on the table spilling the discs…

All it took was a second. All the CDs were scattered on the table, and the lashing serpent was trapped in the plastic box replacing the discs. He tightly secured his punctured finger with a file-binding thread from the drawer. The venom must be prevented immediately from spreading further! With the paper-cutting knife, he peeled off the layer of the skin where the fangs had penetrated. Tears welled up in his eyes, screams escaped from his mouth; this was an indomitable task—to flay one’s own skin, to dissect one’s own flesh, to spill one’s own blood. Yet, when one’s life is at stake, what wouldn’t a person do?

He took a few seconds less than the usual time required to turn on the computer and access the pages of the internet. The search engine —Yellow Pages—anti-venom—the hospitals in Bhopal where treatment was available. The first name that came up was the government medical college hospital nearby.

“No way!” –even in that intense agony, he said to himself.

When it came to stomach pain and matters like that, it was fine but if someone’s life hung in balance, who would want to go to the government hospitals in India, except for the wretched and destitute?

The next name was Narmada Hospital –near Habibganj Railway Station.

Habibganj Railway Station?

How far was it From Lalghati to Habibganj Railway Station? Maybe fifteen kilometres or was it twenty? …And how much time was left?

He rushed down the stairs, all four storeys. In a momentary pause, he glanced around for human assistance —the streets of Lalghati intersection were deserted, silent, empty.

No one? —There was no one with him—among hundreds of virtual friends on social media and dozens of old college-school friends—no one! Then, there were relatives, acquaintances, loved ones, colleagues, and the family that was his life… And yet, in these moments, when death was around him, no one was by his side… No help at hand.

Presence of mind, Gulal!

When was the last time his second-hand car started in one go?

Tick tick tick tick —a cold sweat overwhelmed him.

Tick tick —his eyes went teary.

Tick tick tick grrrr —A faint hope.

Tick tick grrrrr, the engine let out a healthy hum —Oh, it started!

He placed the CD box on the dashboard and the car raced away on the road at the maximum possible speed.

Lalghati wrapped in the dark burqa of the night watched a youth disappear into the darkness.

The sky continued to leak— drip! drip!

Would he come back?

'That's a Russell's Viper!

I remember a TV show I watched with Bini. The Russell's Viper is among the deadliest killers in the world! It takes only an hour for the venom to kill. First, the neurotoxins will mess up the blood, then there will be difficulty in breathing, maybe a haemorrhage or perhaps the heart gives away altogether!'

Only an hour to decide between life and death!

He looked at the clock on his cell phone; fifteen minutes past the deadline! Death is just forty-five steps behind. The speed of the car increased, and so did the torrent.

The windshield wiper, constantly wiping off the water, got stuck suddenly. Fearful of a sudden accident, he reached into the dashboard and brought out a couple of cigarettes—kept there for a situation like this—and crushed two or three cigarettes, scattering their tobacco onto the windshield from the outside. The windscreen was navigable once more.

While his mind negotiated a balance between speed, time, and the road, three identical entities emerge from his mind and take their seats in the car. Two at the back and one in front by his side. As he listened to them, one by one the passengers addressed the snake. The passenger seated next to the driver started to speak to Russell's Viper — "You know how I recognized you? I watched a TV show with Bini,

specifically on the snakes. Though I never watch TV myself. Papa is always glued to channels, sometimes news, sometimes sermons. But sometimes, Bini manages to tune in to a channel about animals by taking the remote from him. She says, 'I get tired of seeing humans all the time.' I used to laugh the most at her unusual choice of entertainment. 'Bini, you should become a veterinarian, not a physician—a cattle specialist! Ha ha!"

The speaker burst into a peel of laughter. Tears welled up in his eyes. Addressing the boxed-up enraged snake that continued to strike its head against the walls angrily, he continued melancholically, "Bini is my younger sister. She is four years younger than me. She is pursuing her MBBS on an education loan. I have told her not to worry about the loan. Just study diligently and be happy. I, the big brother, am there to take care of all her concerns. Just let me root my company firmly in the market and then after her MBBS, she has to pursue her MD and then marry a fellow doctor. She is my only sister, after all. I will celebrate her wedding with great pomp and show, while the world shall watch… You ruined it, buddy!" His voice choked, and he started looking beyond the side glass. The snake inside the box coiled to strike once more.

He had passed Royal Market—Imami Gate, Kamla Paksh Road too and now the Polytechnique Crossroad; and how many priceless moments of life had slipped away? Then he looked at the clock—

Twelve minutes only!

"Have courage, Gulal!"

He ruminated, "If he can't reach the hospital in time, a photo will be printed in the newspaper tomorrow—'Young man found dead in the driver's seat of a car with a body turned blue'."

Cold blue blood? No! There's still some warm red blood left in the veins. If he could, he would make the car fly.

Now another Gulal, sitting in the right back seat, engaged the snake in a conversation.

"You don't know my father. If you had, you would have spared me… He had undergone a bypass surgery ten years ago. Now, he experiences the same discomfort. The doctors have diagnosed a blockage in his veins; he needs another operation. The operation can add another eight to ten years to his life. But my father refuses to be operated upon. He says that whatever little we have, our home and land, it's for us siblings, not for his sake… His operation needs to be done this year. I was thinking, if I grab this project, next month I'll take dad to Delhi; but if I die today, there won't be a question of whether to have the operation; he will die as soon as he hears the

news of my death!”

Saying this, the speaker fell silent and started looking outside and Gulal gripped the steering wheel tightly.

The car whizzed past the New Market and quickly climbed upon Link Road no. 1, but the speed seemed to have decreased from there. Fatigue was creeping through his veins. His head became heavy. ‘Time? Time is life, and life is still in my hands… is time too? Only eight minutes are left.’

“Gulal! Hey, Gulal! Don’t fall asleep!! Miles to drive…”

Driving half consciously, half deliriously, Gulal could see something —the scenes of the road mixed with some vague images:

The dear faces of friends from school, innocent days filled with hard work, dedication and healthy competitions, beautiful classmates from college, the one who always tied a pink ribbon in her open hair bun. The one who was taken by someone else. What had she said after the campus selection, “Won’t we ever meet again Gulal?”…

“Skuchh” —he pulled his hand, and the wriggling snake had come flying inside.

Now, the fourth Gulal shared his mind with the snake,

“Let me tell you a childhood incident; who knows if these are my last moments! In this final moment, I want to remember my mother. It happened when I was around five years old. We were playing cricket on the colony road. I ran to fetch the ball when suddenly a speeding motorcycle hit me. One side of my body was bruised. The neighbouring aunt gave me first aid, tied a bandage, and took me home. But what did I see at home? My mother lay unconscious beside the fence with little Bini crying beside her. Some neighbourhood child had lied to her that, Gulal met with an accident and…”

His throat choked up. Tears welled up in his eyes as he spoke, “My mom had to be rushed to the hospital. She was so traumatized that she was this close to being comatose. It took her a whole month to recover. At that time, I was just a five-year-old, and now I’m a twenty-five-year-old man. Imagine how her heart will be torn apart. My mom is an emotional creature, buddy, she can’t…!”

Falling silent with a blank expression, the last speaker too started gazing into the emptiness outside. Gulal felt a brewing pain in his chest.

“Listen, all of you...” —he tried to see the faces of his three identical twins.

Who?

Where?

There were only two truths in the car—Gulal who was driving and

the viper that had readied its venomous hood inside the box.

He had just taken a right turn from the MP Nagar intersection when… when the car stuttered to a stop!

krrrrrr
krrrrrr
krrrrrr
krrrrrrr

No, there was not much time left now! Perhaps only twenty minutes were left. Death was only a furlong behind, breathing down his neck.

He took the box and ran onto the road.

The heavy rain pulled a wet curtain on the world making it difficult to see anything clearly. Perhaps it was the jeep that delivered newspapers in the morning—a slow-moving, loading autorickshaw. If he ran a little faster, he might catch it.

He climbed onto the footboard and hung on from the backdoor. His hand was slipping away, bit by bit.

He started to feel a constriction in his chest, as if an invisible python was coiling around him, crushing his breath… Not a python, but Russell's Viper!

He constantly fuelled his eros:

"Just hold on, the hospital is near!"

And indeed, the hospital was about to arrive. There was the Habibganj Railway Station on the left, and on the right the brightly lit Narmada hospital.

Oh no! The newspaper jeep veered towards the railway station! He left the slow-moving vehicle and ran onto the road that led to the hospital.

The clock on the cell phone left in the car heralded away the time to emptiness. Who knew how much time was left in life's hands? The only measurement of time was his fragile breaths… breaths that became rapid, short and shorter! Death, which was behind him, could clench Gulal anytime now… mom's Gulal… dad's Gulal… big brother Gulal, a father figure Gulal to little Bini…

"Don't worry, little sis. Just study and be happy. I am here to take care of all the worries!"

His steps started faltering. It was painful to breathe, and his body was turning blue.

He had to turn right—there was the hospital! Before he could turn, his strength gave way. He collapsed. The snake box slipped onto the road.

He lay on the ground in a lifeless state. Behind him, some faces from the dark blue street called out to him:

A girl with a pink ribbon in her open hair stood sadly,

"Won't we ever meet again, Gulal?"

Dad, helplessly thrashing in pain, clutching his chest,

"Son!"

His sister, crying desperately,

"Brother!"

And his mother, who loved him the most,

"My baby!"

A leap second: a moment of life, beyond life… Then, opening his eyes and gathering all his strength, he picked himself.

"I cannot die now! I have too many responsibilities to shoulder!"

He rose unsteadily. He picked up the snake box and ran again, this time perhaps even without a breath in his infected lungs. He fell yet again. His last breath escaped his body and his body turned blue.

He collapsed on the steps of the hospital.

When he came to his senses, his mother, father, and sister were all around him. It seemed as if those three worried faces, crying for the last few days, had now found a reason to smile. There was a needle in his wrist, injecting saline. The junior doctor was checking his blood pressure.

"Everything is fine now. I will send the nurse to remove the drip. You are completely healthy now."

"What about Russell's viper…?"

"We have sent your friend to the Vanavihar National Park. Don't worry about him."

The doctor smiled reassuringly and left the room.

Translated by Pritesh Chakraborty

Papa Is Burning

"You haven't given me the lunch box yet, I'm leaving now," said Vansh, tying his shoelaces in the gallery.

"Almost done! The school bus came in late today. I couldn't have left the kids alone, could I? Here's your tiffin."

Taking the lunch box and moving ahead, the husband's steps suddenly halted.

"This saree!"

His wife, freshly bathed was wearing a brown colored sequined saree with patterns of stars.

"I had put out my sarees in the sun yesterday, I took one out to wear. My wedding sarees haven't been worn properly in years. What are you thinking? Aren't you getting late for office now?"

Her husband didn't say anything. He picked up his bag and didn't look back while leaving.

She was expecting to hear a few words of praise and wondered why her husband behaved so absent-mindedly these days:

"Does he have more work at his table nowadays? Probably he worries about the massive home loan he has taken. His mother had called yesterday. Her words roam in his mind each time he talks to her! 'Why did you waste your life's savings to purchase a house in Gujarat? You have two daughters, not a son who would stay with you. It would have been better if you would have invested in your nephew's studies. After all, you will have to return here after your retirement!' Yes, perhaps that's why it feels that he is distant or is about to leave even though we stay together."

She shrugged her thoughts away and set about working around the house. Her day was passing just like any other—busy and content. Her two daughters returned from school.

"Mumma, I want to eat Khandvi," chirped three and half year old Manu.

"Do I get curd from the shop?" Asked the five-year-old Tanu like a grown-up.

"Get changed from your uniform, I'll go get it." —protecting her children was this mother's sole purpose in life.

Taking her purse, she left to purchase curd.

She met her neighbor Kokila at the shop, who, like always, came forward to chat;

"You are wearing a very pretty saree today. Seems that it is one among your wedding trousseau. These sarees are not really of much use anyway. You have done well to take them out. I think I should do the same…"

This one wants to know everything, whatever concerns others!

Sargam didn't say anything for her own privacy. Taking the curd, she made her way back home.

In her small-town in-laws' place in Madhya Pradesh, she would long for months to see bits of the sun. She had to work hard the entire day and still bear the taunting eyes of her mother-in-law and elder sister-in-law for birthing two daughters. Besides, her sister-in-law would protect her son from her presence in such a manner that she felt fear and uncertainty at these goings-on. That is why, last year, when her husband expressed his desire to take a home loan and construct a permanent home for them in Gujarat, she felt that all her prayers were answered. After settling in Gujarat, she had to do the tiniest jobs, such as fetching curd, for instance. She was also harboring a brave desire to prepare a bio-data for a teacher at school and somehow convince her husband to allow her to join a job! Mindfully engrossed in her housework, Sargam served food to her daughters. Her younger one was a finicky eater, but so active! She started feeding her child with her own hands.

Watching a cartoon with her daughters on the television, Sargam laughed aloud, unaware of the trouble that would visit her later. Her mobile rang.

"No!" Hearing about her husband's accident, she seemed to have lost the ground beneath her feet. She kept standing for a few moments, shocked and traumatized.

"Mumma! Mumma!" she came to herself when her daughters shook her.

"Stay indoors you two. Go to Anandiben aunt's house if you need anything, alright? Tanu, you will be able to call me on the phone, right?"

"Yes, Mumma."

She picked up her purse and the keys to her scooter. Both her daughters looked at her worried face,

"Mumma, where are you going?"

"They are taking your papa to the hospital. You two sisters bolt the door and stay inside."

Before leaving, she requested her neighbor Anandiben to keep an eye on her daughters.

When she reached the hospital, she found her husband admitted to the I.C.U. He had an accident on his way to the office. They would have to operate on him immediately if his life was to be saved. The people at the counter asked her to sign the papers and informed her of the amount that she would need to pay. When the people at the hospital were informing her of the modalities, she didn't know what to do.

She called her husband's office first and then her in-laws. When her

sister-in-law heard of her immediate need of rupees three lakhs and seventy-five thousand for her husband's operation, she disconnected the call.

Her husband's colleagues reached in an hour. They had brought seventy-five thousand rupees with them—fifty thousand from the company and twenty-five thousand collected among themselves.

But where could the rest three lakhs be arranged? That too immediately?

Her husband's savings lay tied up in the duplex he had financed last year. They didn't even have any precious item in the house in hopes of being able to repay that burdensome loan fast.

Jewelry? Yes, she did have jewelry! And that would only be useful in times such as this.

She ran home.

It was quiet in the afternoon.

She had only reached the door when she heard the sound of her daughters weeping.

"Mummy, there's no electricity and you had asked us not to open the doors, so, Manu started crying."

"Then why did you start sobbing with her? You could have gone to Anandiben's house nearby with your sister."

"We went but there was a lock on her door and when I came back and bolted the door, she started crying."

"Alright."

She peered outside the window to her neighbor's house which was locked. Although she had informed Anandiben about the situation at hand and implored her, the person with whom she had a neighborly rapport, who often loaned something or the other from her household. …Was there no one she could call her own in an unfamiliar city?

"Both of you come with me to the hospital."

She was collecting her jewels inside her room when she heard a knock on her door. Outside stood Kokila, her neighbor two houses away.

"Please come later Kokilaben, I have an emergency now."

"That is what I have come to ask. Do you have any difficulty? My son, Bittu heard your daughters weeping from across the street."

"No, that's just…" she wondered if she should say or let it be.

"If you have any difficulty, do share, we are here for you!"

"Kokilaben could you suggest a goldsmith? We haven't had the opportunity to visit any goldsmith ever since we shifted here."

Kokila helped her voluntarily. She sent her elder daughter to babysit Sargam's two daughters and accompanied her to a trusted goldsmith's shop. Hearing Sargam's words, the goldsmith said,

"Sister, loan your things here and when your husband recovers fully,

collect your jewelry."

"No, Bhaisahab, when he recovers, he will certainly make me new jewelry."

She got three lakhs twenty-seven thousand selling her jewelry. She returned.

Sargam took her daughters with her and while shutting all the doors and windows, it seemed as if the spirit of the house whispered to her —that she wouldn't be able to return there! She suddenly felt as if the things inside the house were not her own as if they were just there to be disposed of. She thought that perhaps she felt this way because she was in trauma. She locked the front door and before stepping away, looked back at the house.

Handing over the keys to Kokila, she said, "I don't know when I'd be able to return; please light some incense and lights in the house if you can."

"Don't worry about it. And inform me if you need anything else. Your older sister is here!"

Sargam hugged her; time passes but words remain!

She reached the hospital with her daughters and deposited the amount at the counter, after which the operation started.

She rang everyone again and again but no one was picking up the call—why? Finally, her sister-in-law picked up the phone on the eighth time.

"You already know Sargam; your brother-in-law's business is a little rocky at present. We live in a rental. Our Moksh is completing his studies on an education loan. We get by with some difficulty and expect Vansh Bhaiya to help us at times. You will have to arrange for the money yourself. Don't call here repeatedly."

"Please let me talk to Bhaisahab."

"He and Amma have left for Char Dham in the morning today," saying which her sister-in-law disconnected the call.

Sargam called her parents after that. Her father and mother, old and parents to five daughters, wept at the plight of their eldest child and tried to reassure her as best as they could.

Sargam gave up all expectations and stood gazing at the sky. She prayed for her husband's life in exchange for all the good she had done… and the sky remained wordless!

The operation went on. She suddenly recalled the office picnic the other day—how Vansh had narrowly escaped a snake bite. He had made her promise that night,

"If something happens to me all of a sudden, complete my last rights at the Mahakaleshwar temple. It is said that the spirits suffering an untimely death find their release at the Mahakal. Take me there—you must promise me!"

Why was he talking that way? Was fate speaking through his mouth? And what was written in fate could not be undone? No, no! We have never harmed anyone—why should we suffer this way? He will recover and get back home. Her mind tried to comfort her. She felt conflicted—there was the self that didn't want to think about anything but good wishes and the other self was almost preparing her for the worst:

What if he lost his job due to this accident? What will happen then? Her mind replied firmly—then she would spend the rest of her life taking care of him.

But what if he lost his life? …Her heart trembled as if her hands were slipping off a hill. There was no clear answer from her inner self this time. She tried to control the tears that threatened to overwhelm her.

Her husband's colleagues tried to console her and promising to come back the next day, they left one by one. Her two daughters played outside the operation theatre. She spotted the dusk descending in the evening sky from the hospital corridor. She watched the sun slipping.

The doctor came out of the operation theatre. Sargam ran to him full of hope.

"I am sorry. The patient had already bled a lot!"

"What do you mean?"

No! This couldn't be! How? How? —she kept repeating when she saw the dead body being brought out of the operation theatre.

How long could Sargam have cried? Both her daughters were weeping. The hospital staff had asked her to take away the dead body from there as soon as possible. She didn't have the time to wipe the tears streaming down her face.

Time! It was so cruel!

When she was handed her husband's death certificate, she was calling her father.

"Papa, he has made me promise to take him to the cremation grounds at Mahakaleshwar in Ujjain."

"You start for the place; we will reach there somehow."

Her mother interrupted, "His sugar is really high dear, he's not able to get up. Why don't you call Kuhu? Kuhu and Pradeep will certainly reach there."

She didn't think of calling her sister and brother-in-law in Kerala. She came outside and searched for a hearse on the hospital premises, for the person who had once brought her in a wedding car from her home.

"How much to reach the Mahakaleshwar cremation grounds in Ujjain?"

"Twenty thousand."

"No, leave it."

When she made her way to another van, the first one followed her.

"You can give me fifteen."

"I need two cars. One hearse and a small van."

"How much can you give?"

"Twelve—Twelve thousand."

"You can add the two up and give me twenty-five thousand. Come."

"Twenty-five thousand!" She thought for a moment. She had only twenty-seven thousand in her purse. Should she just get a hearse on rent for the time being? She glanced at her two daughters. They were subdued, a little frightened by their surroundings, sticking to one another.

"Alright then, twenty-five thousand. Let's go."

"Where's the dead body?"

Both the drivers came. She sat both her daughters in the van. She wanted to save her daughters from the trauma of spending an entire night's journey with their father's dead body.

"Tanu… both of you try to get some sleep. I will be right there in that car. You can look at my car in front anytime. Don't be scared alone… your Mumma's here with you… Papa as well!"

The two girls didn't want to leave her at any cost. She somehow lay them in the backseat of the small van, cajoling them, scolding them, covering them with a bedsheet. They would soon fall asleep; then, getting a hold of herself, she somehow sat with the dead body in the hearse and the two cars started their journey.

Right behind was the van carrying her two daughters, her children whom she had never even sent unaccompanied to the local grocer. They would be alone in that car throughout the night—and their protector, their mother? She was alone too! Unarmed! Helpless! Sargam held the dead body's hand.

What cold hands they were! Her hands had the warmth of life! She hid her face in those colds and wept.

All of a sudden, the car following them overtook them and signaled for them to stop. Her heart skipped a beat. Why did he stop?

"Your daughters are sobbing really loudly."

What could the young mother do now? She once thought of bringing both her daughters inside the hearse with her. She would have to decide fast; both the drivers stood looking at her. Even in desperate times, a mother mustn't fall weak. This fearful night mustn't affect her daughters' lives!

"Fine. I will stay with these two. Let the hearse follow us."

Now the mother and her daughters were in one van while the hearse followed them. This was the first time in her life that she had taken a decision, without looking at her husband's face, and stuck to her

resolve… one never knew when time could bring one to the forefront!

An hour passed. Tanu had fallen asleep. Manu stuck to her mother's lap.

"Mumma, I want to go to the toilet."

"Now?"

"I want to go too." Tanu woke up and sat.

Even she had to go. When both her daughters pleaded, unwillingly, she slid the small window between and spoke to the driver,

"Please stop at a public toilet if you see one."

"Madam, where will you get a public toilet in this wilderness? You will need to go in the bushes."

The driver stopped the car. The hearse following them stopped as well. Her husband was both with her and not with her… the husband who kept his wife and daughters at a safe distance even while getting petrol at a petrol pump.

She took her daughters to the thicket nearby. Will there be wild animals in this dense, deserted forest? She heard a wailing sound somewhere close.

"Mumma!" Her younger daughter pulled close in fear.

"It's nothing. Come on, let's go." —the woman who used to be scared of a lizard could now kill a lion if needed… the mother who rode a lion! The goddess who looked after this world! She was the mother who dwelled in every mother!

She peered at the body in the hearse—oh my partner!

The two drivers had peed in the open across the street and now stood smoking beedis.

It might be dangerous to cry at that moment. The young mother tried to regain her inner balance and came and sat with her two daughters inside the car and locked the door. She didn't think it advisable to call the drivers and waited patiently. Her daughters kept their heads on her lap.

"Now go to sleep you two."

"Mumma, I am hungry."

"Me too."

When her daughters asked for food, she started searching her purse. All she had were a packet of biscuits, a packet of glucose and a one-liter bottle of water that was now half empty.

She hadn't drunk a drop of water on this journey because she was saving it for her girls. She had fasted for her husband without water so many times in her life, let this one be for her girls!

The girls lay down after having the biscuits. After smoking their beedis, both drivers returned and the vehicles started moving again—mother and her daughters leading, the corpse of her husband trailing behind.

…And where was the spirit, the part that was said to dwell between a corpse and its God? Everything alive and dead… this vast, dense forest… this entire world—was everything a toy in some invisible hand?

The vehicle moved at its pace. Her daughters have sunk into a deep sleep, resting on her lap. She kept looking at the hearse following her car. A slight lethargy crept into her. Was it a dream or her imagination? Vansh came and sat beside her in the twinkling lights that reflected in her eyes.

"You?"

She moved her hand ahead, but…

The car jolted to a stop.

Why did the cars stop? She looked around, alert.

It was a roadside eatery. The drivers went out to eat.

"Madam, come and eat something."

"No, I don't want to eat."

The other driver came forward and said, "Sister, an entire night's journey is left. You must not have eaten anything at the hospital; your daughters must be hungry as well?"

"No, we have food. Please go and eat."

She spoke in a firm voice and the two of them left.

There were two or three trucks at the eatery. Someone lay shirtless on a cot. Four to five people, who looked and behaved like truck drivers, were eating. Three people were managing the eatery—cooking food and serving, and along with that what else did they serve? Alcohol?

One of them handed out a glass to the two drivers with familiarity. Sargam couldn't hear properly from where she sat but the two drivers declined the drink— "Won't drink today. It's not a regular job, it's a religious duty that we've taken up today."

What duty was that?

Why? Wasn't humanity a religion?

She was observing them from her window—the fact that the drivers couldn't drink alcohol.

She looked towards the hearse where her husband lay sleeping.

Why was the hearse called a wagon of peace?

Why was the cremation ground called a peaceful site?

Was death akin to peace?

And did that peace depend on how the dead individual defined that final peace? Was the end the answer to everything?

May he get peace; may his funeral rites be held as per his wishes.

She took her phone from the purse and dialed a number. No one in her in-laws home picked up her call.

It was eleven at night. They didn't sleep that early. She called

repeatedly but no one picked up. She tried again for the last time.

"Hello," her sister-in-law sounded drowsy.

"Didi, he is no more."

"What??"

"I have arranged for two cars. I am taking him to Mahakaleshwar in Ujjain. You and Moksh reach there directly. Moksh will light his pyre. This is my earnest request to you."

The other side was silent, not a single sound, she didn't understand why the call got disconnected again. She had another number, of Moksh, their nephew. She tried him but couldn't connect the call. She kept the phone back in her purse.

"Will you get your emancipation only if Moksh lights your pyre? If he doesn't come, then consider Tanu your Moksh."

An aromatic smell wafted in from the eatery. Was that why Manu woke up?

"Mumma, I am hungry."

She took out the two remaining biscuits in her purse and mixed some glucose in the water and handed it to Manu.

"I don't want to eat this!"

"Right now, we only have this."

A mother's strictness was teaching her daughter to win over her hunger.

The drivers returned. They had a fresh packet in their hands,

"Sister, we packed some food for you. Please don't refuse. You have small children with you," saying which the two drivers quickly went away. Did they comprehend a woman's dignity, honor, respect and fear?

…Time and society never became so despicable that one couldn't sustain there!

The cars set out again.

She got a call from an unknown number, probably from some other state. Sargam attended the call reluctantly. She heard her brother-in-law's faint voice at the other end,

"I just heard it! …Please do the funeral rites! Even if we start now, we won't be able to make it in time. Give me my kid brother's ashes! …I haven't informed Amma yet… how do I even begin to tell her? … that my younger brother has passed away and yet I have clung on to life. …you will see, I will not be alive for long!"

The funeral procession lasted a never-ending night, entering the small town of Mahakal just before dawn. Was this the hour when the wandering spirits moved home? But she believed that Vansh hadn't left her yet. They were about to reach Shanti Ghat… it was the last time she made herself presentable for her partner. She wiped her face with the border of her saree.

Her wedding saree was stained with the blood of her dead husband, her tears, the dust from her circumstances. Yesterday when she lovingly draped this saree, did she know that another bride was getting ready for her husband? Death itself—decked in the ornaments of blood, tears and dust!

The two cars stop. The Shanti Ghat was located on the banks of the river, a place where all journeys come to a final stop, the final resting place of this world. But what about those whom these travelers leave behind? Those who die a little with every death they witness—their loved ones.

The drivers took out the dead body.

"My partner! Why did you have to leave me so suddenly?" cried her heart mutely, but she looked on absolutely quiet.

The two drivers kept the body on a platform, a place where the dead are accompanied by their friends and family, who perform their last rites. But where were they in this case? To offer flowers? To throw sugar candies? To give away food grains? The wife just touched the feet of her deceased husband—let her feelings be her offering!

She paid twenty-five thousand to the two drivers.

"You have driven us safely to this spot; I'll always be grateful to you both." She expressed her gratitude with folded hands.

One of the drivers folded his hands in response; the other took out one thousand rupees from the money they had received and gave her back.

"This is all that we need for our services."

The two drivers left. The young mother left her daughters with the body and left to search for the caretaker at the cremation ground.

"It will cost you three thousand rupees." The caretaker informed her of the cost.

"Three thousand?" She merely had this amount saved with her. "Fine." She didn't know why she agreed. …Perhaps because sometimes one needs courage not just money to run one's life!

The body was decorated for its last rites.

"Mumma, I am very hungry!"

"Yes, yes."

She came out of the cremation ground with her daughters. There was nothing nearby. She saw a small makeshift tea shop at a distance. She could really use a cup of tea now.

Reaching the shop, she got her two daughters a packet of biscuits each and brought a bottle of water. She scrunched her purse for coins. She couldn't have her tea. She had run out of all the money in her purse and now she worried about what would happen next, but she didn't tell her daughters anything.

They came back to the crematorium.

The corpse was ready. She was wondering how she would offer the funereal fire to the one she had wed, the sacred fire her witness. Her steps faltered when she went around the corpse with the lighted wood. It was difficult to pull herself together. She felt she would fall to the ground, shrieking, any minute!

…No!

A mother of two children could not fall apart at this crucial moment. Tears streamed down her eyes constantly. Her two daughters were playing at a distance. She called them. Getting her daughters to touch the lighted stick of wood once, she finally offered the fire to the corpse, "Pay your last respect to your father."

"Mumma! Papa is burning! Please, save him!"

Tanu shrieked and started weeping. Seeing her sister cry, Manu started sobbing as well. The young mother cried herself and tried to pacify her daughters at the same time.

"No child, your Papa is right there in your heart. Will always be there."

Cajoling, soothing her daughters, she leant on a tin shed and sat down. Having spent their tears, both her daughters fell asleep on her lap. She was looking at the burning corpse. It was shining through the tears in her eyes.

She could feel the heat of the burning corpse on her skin. It was a comforting warmth. She closed her eyes—feeling comforted, as if the warmth of a gentle fire had touched her amidst the snow. She saw her husband standing on the other side. He came to her in the guise of the gentle, sparkling flame and took her hands in his,

"Get up, see, it's a bright, new day."

She sat up, stunned. Her husband was nowhere. But she was awake.

The burning corpse was steadily turning to ashes. She scooped a handful of his ashes and tied it in the border of her saree. This was the sum of everything in this world… ashes.

Wiping her tears, she woke her daughters.

"Wake up! We have to catch the bus!"

"Where are we going, Mumma?"

"To your maternal grandfather's house for now."

She told the caretaker, "I will collect the final remains tomorrow."

…And yonder, she saw her old parents rushing to where she stood.

Translated by Rituparna Mukherjee

Right Eye

That day, my right eye started twitching, but I dismissed it as a mere coincidence. I have never believed in the superstitious beliefs held by some naive rural Indians, which state that the twitching of the left body parts of a woman is auspicious while the right side is considered inauspicious. Similarly, there is an opposite belief for men, with the right side being considered auspicious and the left side inauspicious. I found all of this to be nonsense, and I made it a point to express my disbelief to those around me.

Ever since I discovered the vastness of the world beyond my parents' teachings, I have lived a self-sufficient life, contrary to the traditional nature of my mother, who has become deeply rooted in cultural practices. I have resisted conforming to any tradition, custom, belief, or superstition. Despite countless heated arguments, I have remained steadfast and refused to bow down to baseless beliefs and superstitions. Even during my college years, in the revolutionary age of questioning, I challenged the existence of God and offered unconventional definitions.

When I got married, everyone reluctantly accepted me as a modern housewife, or perhaps they had no choice but to accept me. There were countless beliefs and superstitions surrounding the well-being of my husband, such as his longevity of life being linked to glass bangles, his well-being being protected by the sparkle of silver coins, and the necessity of wearing *bindi*-vermilion as a sign of being a devoted wife. There were even superstitions that stated only a well-dressed bride would have a happy married life. I took part in these practices, if at all, merely to avoid unnecessary arguments or occasionally due to fashion trends. Even during my pregnancy, I disregarded invisible protections and relied solely on the advice of my gynaecologist. I paid no attention to the superstitions that involved tying asafoetida in a black cloth on my wrist, carrying a knife and matchsticks while traveling, and avoiding fragrances and henna. I firmly believed that if I took good care of myself, my baby would be healthy and happy. And indeed, he was!

However, my overt atheism deeply saddened my elderly widowed mother-in-law. She eventually decided to settle permanently in her ancestral village, where every step is guided by gods, ancestors, and rituals, creating an environment that she finds comforting and beautiful, like a jewel set in a necklace.

So, on that particular day, my right eye twitched, but it went unnoticed. My husband had been away on a week-long business tour and was due to return that evening. My five-year-old son, Naivedya, had a school holiday due to the rainy weather, and we were at home

together. Engrossed in our own activities, Naivedya was watching an animated movie about the Ramayana on television while I soaked chickpeas in water to prepare for the evening meal. As I was tired from a long day, I eagerly anticipated my husband's return, and I had almost completed the preparations to welcome him home with warmth and joy. I had laid a new silk sheet adorned with scenic images on the bed, and I had taken care of personal grooming tasks like waxing and nail trimming. I also planned to make chickpeas for dinner.

While I was in the kitchen, gazing at the clouds through the window, a ghazal spontaneously escaped my lips:

तेरे आने की जब खबर महके,
तेरी खुशबू से सारा घर महके…
(With the news of your arrival
The whole house smells of your fragrance)

Suddenly, my cell phone's favourite Western ringtone interrupted the moment.

You and I. In this beautiful world

It was my husband calling from the other end. We exchanged inquiries about each other's well-being with a yearning for modest affection. He informed me that his boss had mistakenly left an important file at home, and he needed me to deliver it to his office right away. While I should have simply agreed, I hesitated for a moment before eventually giving in. I had been managing all the household chores single-handedly, from grocery shopping and paying bills to grinding wheat and retrieving jewellery from the locker. I owned a shiny two-wheeler and had gained a reputation as a disciplined driver.

As soon as I hung up the phone, I began preparing to leave. I put on tight jeans, and a snug kurti, and in no time, I was ready to go. My son, Nanu, or Naivedya, had no objections. On occasions like these, Mrs. Singh, our neighbour, proved to be quite helpful and accommodating.

Mrs. Singh's son and daughter-in-law were engineers, working in a city far down south. They were well-off and had no need for an elderly mother who adorned herself with bangles, *bindis*, and sarees. Mrs. Singh also had a grown-up daughter settled abroad with her husband, children, and parents. Now, one could only find old pictures, a cell phone, and a webcam of Mrs. Singh's daughter on the internet. Mr. Singh, her husband, was retired. When he wasn't occupied with long walks or laughter club sessions in the morning and evening, he spent hours wandering around places like old age homes, orphanages, temples, or railway stations in search of meaning in life. Meanwhile, Mrs. Singh remained at home full-time. Her thyroid condition wasn't

as dangerous as her need for social interaction. She spent her days sitting in her regular chair on the porch, keeping an eye on all the activities taking place in the neighbourhood. She used to visit the neighbours' homes for hours, but people grew tired of her constant presence and began finding excuses to avoid her. Eventually, Mrs. Singh stopped sitting elsewhere and confined herself to the balcony. From early afternoon until late evening, and sometimes even at midnight, you could spot this lonely old woman staring into the solitary darkness of the street. The Singhs were not only bored with themselves but also with each other, and their inner desolation had made them exceptionally sociable. Every day, they became a source of joy for all the families in the neighbourhood. Whenever Mrs. Singh went on a pilgrimage to a river or a mountain, she never forgot to bring vermilion, bangles, and iron-copper rings (she remembered everyone's sizes!) for all the neighbours. The shining yellow, copper, or black pearl bracelets adorning the wrists of the neighbourhood children were, in one way or another, gifts from Haridwar, Kashi, Vaishno Devi, and undoubtedly, Mrs. Singh. On occasions like Holi, Diwali, and Karva Chauth, I, too, touched her feet as a mark of respect. I addressed her as "aunty ji," and I encouraged my child to address her as grandmother. In return, with utmost gratitude, Mrs. Singh kindly offered to take care of my child, providing the tender love and care that only a grandmother could provide to her descendants. However, as I was about to prepare Naivedya and take him to Mrs. Singh's place, an unsettling occurrence disrupted my actions. My right eyelid began trembling uncontrollably, signalling a superstitious belief my mother held regarding the ominous nature of such an occurrence, particularly concerning the safety of children.

"Perhaps I should take him along, just to be safe," a voice inside me suggested.

"Nonsense! These superstitions hold no power!" another voice countered.

I resumed combing my child's hair and planted a customary kiss on his forehead, ready to embrace his delightful countenance. Yet, once again, the throbbing sensation in my eyelid returned.

Thump, Thump, Thump!

"Why not take him with me? What harm could it do?" A subtle temptation crept into the voice, and I made up my mind to bring Naivedya along.

Outside, the previous downpour had ceased entirely, and the clouds dispersed, revealing the bright sun. As I ventured beyond the confines of our dwelling, I attempted to start the scooter but was interrupted by Naivedya running towards me, halting directly in front of it. The persistent twitching of my right eye continued, instilling an unsettling

thought—what if the scooter collided, skidded, or fell? Naivedya, positioned in its path, would be at greater risk of harm than I! The cruelty of this imagination gripped my body, rendering my calves and wrists weak. I parked the scooter on its stand and silently observed my child. My mind wandered through a labyrinth of thoughts, much like a winding mole traversing its tunnels. I questioned myself in astonishment, why did I not wish to leave the child in the care of our neighbours today? The answer swiftly emerged from within, cloaked in worrisome thoughts… How dependable was Mrs. Singh's aging body? What if my child were to wander onto a busy street? …What if he were to accidentally drop something heavy on himself? …What if he ventured alone onto the rooftop? Countless more concerns began flooding my mind. For the first time, Mrs. Singh seemed incapable of handling the child.

Yet, was it truly safe to allow my son to stand in front of the scooter?

"Hold on!" I felt his grip tighten around me, his face pressed against my back, filled with fear. I scolded myself for not staying calm and focused. In the last five to seven minutes, my eyes hadn't blinked once. Increasing my pace, I regained my composure and asked my son, "Nanu, are you having fun?"

"Yeah, Mumma! I'm having fun!" he exclaimed, his joy evident.

Feeling relieved, I started to relax. Instead of taking the usual route crowded with motorcycles and cars, I chose the deserted VIP road, which remained quiet in the afternoon.

The weather in Bhopal was typically pleasant, with the sun setting amidst dusky clouds. Young couples stood in pairs along the lake's banks, while little girls covered their faces with dupattas. The eyes of young boys reflected courage, excitement, and determination. Holding hands firmly, they wandered among the exotic flowers blooming in various shades of white, bright crimson, crimson vermilion, and pale blue along the road. A fountain in the lake shot up, attempting to touch the sky, and the wind scattered the falling drops like an invisible nymph playing with pearls. In the distance, I spotted a kayaker spreading nets to catch aquatic beauties.

My mind was at ease, and I gently patted my son's hands resting on my waist. He seemed to sense my change in demeanour and began chattering non-stop.

"Mumma, when will Papa be done with his work?"

"Soon, my love."

"What will we do then?"

"We'll go home."

"No, Mumma, let's go to Bharat Bhavan," he insisted, not merely suggesting.

The dreamlike journey along the VIP road came to an end, and we reached a bustling intersection. At that moment, my right eyelid began to twitch, forming a furrow on my forehead. I carefully observed the motorcycles and cars passing by in front of us. As I prepared to accelerate the scooter, my confidence wavered, fearing that a large truck would suddenly appear and run us over. My feet rested on the ground, and I realized that I had become what I used to criticize—an inexperienced driver who repeatedly placed their feet on the ground while riding. In those timid moments, my behaviour was worse than that of a novice scooter rider. I moved forward several times, only to retreat out of fear and unease. I stood there, unsure how long I would remain a spectacle at this familiar turning point I had crossed countless times. Thankfully, a considerate car driver came up from behind and signalled for us to cross. Swiftly manoeuvring my scooter around the car, I walked it parallelly for a while before finally crossing the road.

Emerging beyond the billowing clouds, the sun began showering scorching rays of light. As we navigated the busy road near Kamla Park, the challenges of driving became apparent amidst the ongoing road widening work, muddy remnants from recent rains, and the chaotic collision of vehicles. Passing by Shani Mandir, a moment of reverence overcame me, and I found myself folding my hands in prayer.

“Oh Lord, protect us,” I whispered.

Observing the slow pace of our scooty, I felt a pang of frustration when a group of school children on bicycles swiftly overtook us from behind. Stressed, I scolded my son a couple of times without a valid reason. Perhaps it was my anxiety seeping into my words as I cautioned, “Just sit quietly, or I won’t bring you along next time.”

Children often fear their mother’s reprimands, and Naivedya clung to me tightly. His breathing was shaky, and I realized I was driving absentmindedly, my eyes darting anxiously, brows furrowed, and my mind on high alert.

We finally arrived at the office, and a sense of relief washed over me like a weary triumph. After parking the scooty, my son started walking toward the building but then unexpectedly began running.

“Naivedya!” I shouted.

My scream was so loud that it halted the instinctive movements of those around us. Realizing my mistake, I hesitated briefly, then rushed to my son, scolding him in a hushed tone. Overwhelmed with a profound sense of insecurity for his well-being, I lifted him into my arms. Panting on the stairs, with my five-year-old securely held against my shoulder, I made a silent promise that not even a strand of his hair would be touched by any harm. My mindset resembled that of

a protective mother cow, prepared to confront wolf-like dogs to shield her newborn calf.

Together, we reached the deserted third-floor corridor of the office. The air was still, with only the cooing of pigeons echoing through the dusty surroundings. Dull yellow government-coloured pillars stretched far and wide, and before entering, I took a moment to calm my racing heart, compose my facial expressions, and firmly grasp my son's wrist. Inside, the office was a typical representation of our government offices—by eleven o'clock, a few employees had arrived or were still arriving. Most of the desks in the vast hall were cluttered with stacks of old files, while the worn, grimy wooden chairs remained unoccupied. The ceiling fans, adorned with patterns resembling fat, yellow bees, lazily rotated, contributing to the overall atmosphere of monotonous silence, which could only be described as office discipline.

Introducing myself, I handed over the file to an officer-like man. As he worked on it, he paused midway and suggested that I leave the file with him, assuring me that he would personally deliver it to the senior officer. However, I stood there, seemingly deaf and dumb, unable to respond. The clerk stared at me strangely, abandoned his work, picked up the file, and proceeded towards his senior officer's cabin. Only when I saw him enter the cabin with the file did I feel assured that it would safely reach the hands of his superior. Gripping my son's wrist tightly as we descended the stairs, I plucked a stray eyelash from my blinking eyelid and cast it away. I had heard that this action could ward off misfortune.

My mind felt lighter than ever. Firstly, I had smoothly completed half of the work, which brought me a sense of accomplishment. Secondly, in difficult situations, time tends to elongate, allowing us to naturally prepare ourselves to deal with them. I reminisced about the alertness required while climbing the slippery steps of the ghat with our wet toes in the river. At that moment, my mind had reached a state of focused clarity, undeterred by distractions. Everything unfolded with careful precision and strict attention to detail.

I had seated my son behind me, started the scooter, and cautiously accelerated while surveying the surroundings. As I exited the office premises, I patiently waited for a jeep to pass by before proceeding onto another road. From there, we briskly made our way along the left bank. I reassured myself that everything was normal, despite any inner concerns.

"Mama, is the work Papa asked you to do finished?" my son inquired.

"Yes, my son," I replied, offering him reassurance.

"Then let's go to Bharat Bhavan," he exclaimed, expressing his

happiness.

Naivedya had a profound fondness for Bharat Bhavan and insisted on visiting the place frequently. The sprawling complex resembled a long canvas, adorned with ornamental stone sculptures and charming crafts from the ceramic workshop. The serene shore of the lake, teeming with wild flowers and a plethora of butterflies, captivated his imagination. He would often carry his drawing notebook and crayons, creating vivid artwork inspired by the lake, the flowers, the enchanting butterflies, and the bats that emerged in the evening sky. As a middle-class mother, I cherished my son's extraordinary talent and never missed an opportunity to take him there.

"No, Nanu, not today!" I protested.

"Why not?" His strike was forceful, causing the scooter to waver.

Filled with fear, I came to a sudden halt. He was determined, and I was desperate to avoid the situation. However, he persisted, leaving me no choice but to resort to a shameful lie.

"Son, there's very little petrol in the scooter, just enough to get us home. If we go to Bharat Bhavan, we might run out of petrol midway, and then how will we return home? Papa is also out of town, and there won't be anyone to help us!"

His innocent eyes were convinced at my troubled face, and with a heavy heart, I restarted the scooter. Inwardly, I cursed my right eye, for it was my own insecurity that had betrayed my child.

Now we were on our way back home. A woman of similar age passed by, driving a car, with a child of Naivedya's age sitting beside her, joyfully conversing as they travelled. In that moment, I realized how deeply fear, beliefs, and superstitions are intertwined with status and power. Had I been in a luxurious car at that moment, shielded from the constant vigilance required on my modest two-wheeler, I might not have been tormented by the superstition associated with my right eye. God, religion, and superstition were the refuge of the weak, constructed like caves to hide from their fears.

As we approached our home, my self-confidence gradually resurfaced. The strength in my wrists gripping the handlebars grew, and I confidently navigated across the four-lane highway before turning into our neighbourhood, signalling and honking effortlessly.

As the night descended, a whimsical thought crossed my mind, and a smile tugged at the corners of my lips. Bringing my scooty to a gentle halt, I parked it gracefully in front of my humble abode. From the balcony, I spotted Mrs. Singh eagerly waiting, her hands clasping a colourful array of inflated balloons.

"Nanu, look! We've blown up so many balloons just for you! Shall we play?" Her excitement was palpable, and I couldn't help but mirror her enthusiasm with a warm smile.

My son glanced up at me, his eyes brimming with curiosity. And in that fleeting moment, a spark ignited within him. With joy fuelling his little legs, he took off running, his laughter trailing behind.

As their laughter echoed through the air, I found myself joining in, unable to contain my own mirth. Although my right eye inexplicably twitched, it was a mere quirk, unable to overshadow the sheer delight of this precious moment.

Translated by Anuradha Dosad

The Hero

A new executive officer was arriving at the district panchayat that day.

Every employee stood in the office premises, prepared to welcome their new boss, marigold garlands in hand and subservient smiles on their faces. And before the boss could reach there, his name had made its way—Devraj Singh! The son of a big man, his name sounded like it belonged to one who was well-endowed in life, and it was heard that he was born and brought up in Delhi. His experience in this job was merely that of two and a half to three years, and during that time, he had suspended four officers in his previous post. People said that he had suspended the peon merely because he was nodding off to sleep in the office. So, the staff here stood alert, trying to protect their jobs.

"A job feeds an entire family, but what do these big officers know of this!"

The peon, Ramcharit, remarked to the clerk, Manohar. He was quite despondent, hearing of the hapless peon's fate in the other office. He had three children and after office hours, he worked quite a while in a bidi-factory. A thin layer of exhaustion always shone in his eyes, and that day, he recalled the number of times he had felt like falling asleep during his duty hours that month. Naturally, he was a little scared.

The rest were nervous as well, planning to do their jobs in this office with renewed vigour. Meanwhile, the boss's jeep entered the office premises and many hearts pounded loudly. The jeep stopped and the boss, even more impressive than his name, set his foot on the office premises for the first time. Tall, well-built, a fair, urban face, a lion-like confidence radiated from his face. The employees greeted him properly, one after another with salaams and garlands. Ramcharit stepped forward and even touched his feet, thinking about how this job fed his large family.

"Well, all of this is fine."

The boss started speaking after a formal introduction and nineteen-twenty pairs of eyes, with their racing hearts, admitted themselves to the court of their new ruler.

"I want to make one thing very clear, carelessness… indiscipline…" pacing, he gazed at each face standing in a row. The scene looked as if a row of truant students was being paraded in front of their teacher.

"Slander… corruption… politics, I absolutely don't want any of this in my office."

The subordinates nodded their head in agreement just like children agree to the wisdom of experienced story-tellers.

"Besides, all of you must have heard about how I work and if you

haven't…"

The chief officer smiled authoritatively,

"…We will work together from now on."

The stenographer Shilpa pulled her dupatta down, which was at her throat. The peon Ramcharit touched the cap on his head to see if it was placed properly. The head clerk took out his handkerchief and wiped his dry lips. Murari, the computer operator, stood alert, and Manohar, the clerk, switched off his cell phone in his pocket.

"This is office hours and all of us should be inside the office, am I right?"

The staff raced to catch up with the speed of their young boss.

As soon as he reached his table, the boss started flipping through the files, his hands stopped at one file momentarily and then continued in the task. The bell rang suddenly. The hearts of the staff palpitated, the peon ran; the clerk, Manohar had been summoned.

Was that the first order, the very first compliance?

"Manohar, these are the inventory files of the district panchayat having the budgets for the primary and secondary schools."

"Yes Sir."

"Our office allocates funds to these schools based on hundred per cent attendance."

"Yes."

"Huh" —the boss had a frown on his head— "But the attendance is mostly around seventy per cent, in almost all the schools."

"Yes."

"Alright. Send Joshi ji. I will call you later."

"But Sir, junior Sir is on medical leave."

"Fine! Alright, prepare a notice stating that the funds allocated to the schools will now be reduced to 70%. By order, Chief Executive Officer, District Panchayat; and after getting this signed by me, send it to all concerned."

"No, Sir!", Manohar gasped loudly.

The senior officer lifted his eyes from the file and looked at him. The blood flowing in his shins ran cold for a moment and then the thin—short—dark clerk licked his dry lips and said, "Sir, the villages in this area are poor. There has been famine here for years. Besides, what can really grow in Bundelkhand! Ever since the mid-day meals have started in these schools, it has saved the many children who would otherwise have perished with hunger."

"I don't want to hear you praising the merits of the scheme; please do what you are asked."

"Sir, I am just requesting you to…" He stopped mid-sentence thinking about the consequences. Outside the window, a lonesome bird shrieked in the heat of the midday sun.

“Finish what you were saying.”

“Sir, before you take a decision, would you please pay the schools a visit…”

“Oh, I see! So now, you will teach me how to make decisions!” The senior officer remarked intertwining his gentle fingers.

Manohar went quiet.

“So, you argue that the schools should be given the 100% budget on a 70% attendance! That we should continue to fund the luxuries of the corrupt with the remaining 30%?”

“What is this corruption you are talking of, Sir?” —the clerk looked squarely into the eyes of his superior. “The secondary schools receive four rupees per student while the government provides only two rupees fifty paise per primary student. Just think, how are two rupees fifty paise enough to feed a child fully? Sir, even a 100% budget is often inadequate for these schools with 70% attendance. There are so many self-help groups, members of Teachers’ Associations and headmasters who come here with their complaints. I have taken care of this file ever since this scheme was introduced in our district. …Sir, if you reduce this budget, it will be akin to snatching away food from the mouths of these kids. It is my earnest request to you, please don’t issue such a notice, Sir! You haven’t seen the hunger of these poor children!”

“And you have seen that?” The boss’s eyes were slowly turning red.

“Yes, Sir, I have seen it!” He said, lowering his head.

A clerk was standing in front of his I.A.S ranking superior armed with nothing but a beating heart, wobbly legs and a mountain-like resolve. …A powerless standing for the weak!

“So, you are suggesting that my decision is wrong!”

“I am just urging you to consider that the hunger of several children is directly associated with your one decision and before you take that step, you could at least visit the schools…!”

“That’s it!” The boss stood up; Manohar started thinking of his family.

“Either you apologize for your behavior and prepare this notice or…!”

The Boss stopped for one deathly second; Manohar’s heart thrummed in his chest.

“We will talk about this tomorrow.”

“Sir…”

“You can leave now.”

Manohar’s face sank as he left the cabin. He sat robotically in his seat. Shilpa, the head clerk, Murari and Ramcharit: there was a rainbow of questions in everyone’s eyes,

“Why did the boss call you?”

"What did he say?"

"Why is your face drooping? Did he scold you?"

"How is his temperament?"

He replied vaguely to each question. Didn't Manohar already know that colleagues were never friends!

Sometimes he thinks how people working together in the same office for days—months—years become colleagues—competitors—critics… sometimes enemies; but never really friends! Once, when operator Murari came half an hour late for three days at a stretch, the head clerk filed a report against him. The poor fellow's salary was cut although he had taken an informal, spoken permission. Murari's wife had just given birth and in the midst of running around the hospital, home, and office, he used to forget his lunch box those days. And here in the office, the people hid snakes in their sleeves. Murari complained that Shilpa spoke on her cellphone for long periods of time although she was the most adept at her job. The junior officer had scolded Shilpa, the most hard-working staff, in front of the entire office. And the very same Shilpa, whose eyes brimmed with tears at her ignominy, lodged a complaint to the senior officer against Ramcharit, stating that he had left a ceiling fan running the previous day, a minor oversight. Ramcharit couldn't even protest that while shutting the office that day, there was a power cut… and the senior officer had scolded him terribly, his voice audible even outside his cabin. For two days after that, Ramcharit wasn't seen chewing his usual tobacco, drinking cup after cup of tea, but this very person was the common tattletale in the office, spinning stories sometimes at the senior officer's cabin, other times at the junior officer's table and sometimes at the clerk's desk right opposite him! …Still, Manohar preferred this office to the one where he was posted two years back. There, the office staff was used needly in the politics between the senior and junior officers in a way that reminded him of lines from Dushyant Kumar's poem,

In order to catch a Rohu fish in this pond,
You have scattered the small fries as prey.

Like many others, Manohar had been transferred because, in the battleground between the senior officer and the well-connected junior officer, he couldn't take sides. And although he admired the senior officer, it was he who had arranged for his transfer.

"Come on Manohar Ji, tell us what happened in the boss's cabin?"

When Manohar refused to respond to the cunning and beautiful Shilpa's entreaties, a cold disappointment settled in his colleagues' hearts; they felt deprived of an entertaining morsel of gossip.

That entire day Manohar felt conflicted, his self, clefted in two, his inner voice vociferous. Whenever he heard the bell ring at the boss's

cabin or Ramcharit running around with work, he would think he was being summoned. Inside the depths of his heart lay a Manohar who was shaking in anxiety, and the other Manohar was as large as a banyan, firm and calm.

"What was the point of telling Sir so many things? Did you forget that one should never chase a horse and try to get ahead of a senior official? Now you will be kicked out of your job!" His weak heart listed the things he had to do: purchasing medicines for his old parents, the school fees for Sonu and Monu, …his wife, Revati, balancing every penny that entered their household, everyday groceries!

His weak heart lay quiet with wet eyes. Then, his mind rang out clear with the voice of his other self,

"Such a life is useless; if I spend my entire damn life worrying about feeding myself and others, what is the difference between a human and an animal? If your meddling helps to feed thousands of children, then you shouldn't back out, Manohar! How long will you witness and condone wrongdoings in this life?"

His heart brought him back to a series of images:

The inferior rice and adulterated oil in the ration shops!

His slum, filled with the odors of broken drains, ill-maintained roads, stray animals, waste!

The inconsiderate behavior of the officers at the slightest pretexts!

The child Manohar, youth Manohar, adult Manohar—all regretful, depriving their spirits! Would the aged Manohar look the same?

"No," escaped from his lips. His colleagues looked at him, amidst their work and someone noticed that his face sometimes illuminated like a lamp and sometimes appeared sunk. He appeared lost in himself and finally, someone said,

"Don't you want to go home today? Get up, the office hours are over."

"Oh yes!" said he, stunned and came outside.

On his way home by the city bus, Manohar closed his sleepy eyes and rested his head on the window. The breeze, heated throughout the day, was cool now. The cool breeze soothed Manohar a little. Manohar remembered that he didn't have lunch; he felt hungry; a flaming hunger! Instantaneously, he thought of the numerous children who awaited the midday meal on their empty stomachs. One such government school was near his house and he had seen the children, waiting in line for the food—their limbs shaking restlessly in helplessness, waiting in hunger and the ecstasy in their faces as they ate which reminded one of the infant Krishna eating butter.

An extreme happiness!

Infant Krishna!

A filling meal!

He found his father lying in a cot on the verandah when he reached home. He was sick quite often. He stayed up most nights and when he dozed off, the entire family breathed a sigh of relief. Manohar sat on the floor next to the cot. How peaceful his father's face looked in his sleep! If he didn't apologize to his boss the next day and was suspended, his father would probably not sleep for a few months. Who knows if his weak, ailing body could bear this shocking news! He was alarmed and silently gazed at his father; how fulfilled his father looked!

Babuji!

He got up with a heavy heart. When he entered the threshold, he saw his mother. Her habituated hands were making ropes out of old rags and clothes, her face had the business of the creator of this world. It was best to keep out of her way. These things—rugs woven out of such ropes, wicker fans, sacks made out of old trousers… yes, every such thing was rendered so beautiful because his mother put her soul in it.

Exhaustion had settled permanently on his mother's face when he was younger and a student. His father had been a postman and his mother had to cook in other households because along with his studies, and the marriage of his three elder sisters, they had to also worry about paying off the loan for this tiny apartment. But when Manohar became a clerk, that too in a government office, his worldly mother retired from the society altogether. Now, she spent her entire time playing with her grandchildren, tending to her husband and keeping the house tidy, looking as peaceful as a nun. …Would his mother look this peaceful if he lost his job?

Ma!

His heart broke, and his mother, lost in her creation, looked up to the door, surprised,

"Manu! When did you come? I was so engrossed in this… wait, I'll get you some water."

His mother was about to get up, supporting her hand on her waist, when his wife, Revati, put a glass and a container of water in front. Manohar glanced at his departing wife. Revati's hardworking hands were never still, the part of the saree on her head never slid down. Her life was mingled in this two-room apartment in the way that fragrance becomes a part of a flower. And not just the household, she was the mainstay of the black cow tied to a shed nearby, the birds on the parapet, the dogs in the alley, the veritable Annapurna. Manohar often wondered how she managed everything with his meagre salary. And if he was suspended, the hands of this Annapurna would be empty.

Revati!

In his imagination, Manohar saw the slip of cloth on Revati's head slip.

"Manu, where are you lost? Why does your face look like that? Did something happen at the office?"

"Not at all!" he smiled without a reason.

Revati brought in the tea tray then. He winked at her as their eyes met while he took the cup. His wife smiled shyly and moved ahead and he thought that irrespective of whatever chanced in the office the next day, his family should be happy for the moment.

"Papa is here! Papa is here!"

Sonu and Monu returned home after playing in the neighborhood. Chirping, they hugged him. The seven-year-old Sonu and the five-year-old Monu were the twin images of his childhood. His life has two goals! His two reasons for living!

Both the children climbed on his lap. Their touch moved Manohar deeply.

Sonu!

Monu!

"Apologize to the boss tomorrow!" said the voice in his heart and the other self, put the children away from the lap in reaction.

He got up and left to roam around the settlement. Only a few houses in this locality had concrete houses and a salaried income like him. Most of the residents here were small craftsmen, local grocers or hardworking laborers. Naturally, the people around the settlement respected him, greeted him politely on his way and addressed him as 'Manohar Babu'. All of them were of the opinion that his life had no difficulty.

Sewing the shoes tightly, the cobbler Radheshyam saluted him from his shop at the crossroads and he merely smiled in return.

Tomorrow if he wasn't a government servant anymore, the people like the cobbler Radheshyam… the laundryman Mohan… the artisan Ramesh… would these people still greet him so amicably?

He made his way from the settlement to the main road. His neighbor, Hariram Kushwaha put up his vegetable cart here and in the evenings, his seven-year-old son, Vibhor used to stand by his father, helping him.

Manohar sank to the bench nearby—weak! exhausted!

"Namaste Manohar Babu! How is everything?"

Hariram appeared genial as always. He was a little free and was sprinkling water on his fresh green, yellow and purple vegetables to make them even more vibrant, while the little Vibhor played with the jingling coins.

A customer came at that moment, saving Manohar the necessity to

reply. He called Vibhor to his side,

"Say, Vibhor, do you go to the school every day?"

"Yes."

"Your school gives you food, correct?"

"Yes." This affirmative had more enthusiasm in it.

"What did you eat today?"

"Today is Tuesday, so we got kheer—halwa—*puri* today. And you know what uncle, I ask Amma every day when Tuesday will come because our school gives us such tasty food every Tuesday."

"What about the rest of the days?"

"And the rest of the days too, I eat to my fill—rice, lentils, chapattis. And one day, there was even a *Rasgulla* on the plate, a large *Rasgulla*!"

His fingers held the imaginary sweet in his hand, and happiness spread on his face.

"What if the school stopped providing you with a filling meal?"

The child looked scared at his question and ran and hugged his father—Manohar's conflict dissipated.

The next morning, the office seemed to lay in his wait. He had not even sat properly when Ramcharit came and relayed the Boss's instruction,

"The Boss has summoned you."

Manohar stood still for a couple of minutes as if he was gathering his bits and pieces and then took one step after another.

"Manohar Babu, do you have any difficulty?" touching his shoulder, Ramcharit asked.

"Not anymore," said he in a voice that Ramcharit had never heard before.

Seeing him, the Boss's pen stopped working on the file.

"So, Manohar, what have you decided? Will you apologize for yesterday's behavior and prepare this document or not?" the boss asked in the loud voice of someone who was assured of his win.

"Sir, I have the same request, a visit before you take this decision…"

"What?" the superior officer was as shocked for a moment as if he had seen the sun at night; but a firm resolve painted his face the very next moment and his eyes gleamed in admiration, pity and harshness.

"Alright, you and I will pay them a visit; but think about it, if you are found obstructing a government order, your actions will be investigated."

Sir, what if I am not found guilty? Manohar thought but didn't articulate.

When Manohar left in the boss's jeep, a hailstorm of guesswork—estimations—speculations rained in the office,

"Why did sir take Manohar on the visit? And if he wanted someone, why Manohar alone?"

“What kind of magic wand has Manohar used on the boss that he has become such a favorite on the very second day of the boss’s arrival?”

“Manohar is quite sullen!”

“You don’t know how the boss operates—he feeds you milk and then takes you down. Just wait and see, Manohar will be the first one to be punished. He is being very over-smart, isn’t he? Huh!”

Ramcharit, standing outside the circle of banter and gossip, looked quietly at the departing jeep,

“May God be with you, Manohar Babu; my children also study in a government school!”

The jeep sped ahead on the shiny, black road with its carefully manicured flowers and plants within the tree guards. They soon left behind the attractive urban locale and took the dirt road.

“Which village do we visit Manohar?” the boss asked without looking back from the seat next to the driver.

“Wherever you wish, sir!”

There was an innocence in Manohar’s voice and a deep trust on his face, perceiving which the boss became a little irritated—that ordinary clerk! His head was inside the lion’s jaw and yet…!

But he was quiet. His heart felt heavy. Sleep came late last night, imagining about the disrespect of a subordinate, pardon and his greatness. And whatever transpired now was not just unexpected but also highly irritating!

‘Why haven’t I suspended this clerk yet?’

‘Why did I venture out for a visit at the words of an ordinary clerk?’

‘Why am I tolerating him? Why? Why?’

The senior officer didn’t look displeased, rather absent-minded. Turning, he saw the calm visage of the clerk.

‘Isn’t he even a little scared of me? …I’ll show him!’

Devraj’s face shone like a lake gleaming in the sunbeams due to the prestige—power—pride associated with his post of a senior officer.

The dirt road was filled with thorny bushes, pointed stones, potholes and dust clouds. The jeep finally stopped at a village. The word ‘Sanatanpur’ was engraved on a stone. The men sitting on the raised platforms looked up when they saw a government jeep stop there, the people who were working came up, and the urban boss was surprised at the speed with which the Sarpanch arrived on the scene.

The urban people were not really aware of the ways of the village, that it was but a huge kin-like settlement. The villages might lag behind the cities in terms of development, they were, however, far advanced in social graces. These were places where everyone knew about each other, followed the societal and cultural norms, and were decent even with enemies. But of all man-made creations—pearls,

gemstones, prayer beads—the best is the immaculate, pure, Indian village life!

The sarpanch walked ahead along with a few young, middle-aged and old villagers. The patrician, senior government official walked in the middle and following him was the dark—short—thin clerk, Manohar. One couldn't spot school-going children in the village. The best politician of Sanatanpur, its Sarpanch, had an opportunity to impress this government officer,

"Sir, ever since the government has initiated the midday meal, you wouldn't spot a single truant school-goer in the village! The boys, who used to shy away from studies, now attend school regularly. Moreover, sir…" —a gleam of a golden future sat on the experienced Sarpanch— "the girls, who had to discontinue their studies, are sent to school again by their parents in hopes of the afternoon meal!"

However, the officer wasn't concentrating on these facts, his attention was on his novel experience. Amidst the tiled houses and concrete scaffoldings and verandahs, the thin cobbled street stretched like a sliver of white cloud in the sky, the one which is commonly considered the pathway for *Eiravat*, the heavenly elephant. Mingled with the dusty trees, the smoke from the smoldering stoves, the smell of the cattle and mud huts was peace in every atom of the environment as comforting as the smell of a mother's lap! It felt as if life itself slowed its pace here.

And the one who was in a hurry, the senior government officer, walked through the village and reached the school. Two or three government employees in the school were found ready, standing in welcome outside, in the verandah of the two-roomed school painted in the government colors. The boss was not taken aback this time.

A young, contractual female teacher had just written the letters of Hindi on the blackboard underneath the shade of a neem tree outside the school. Her young learners, writing the letters in their slates in all shapes, were navigating their way in the Hindi alphabet.

Singh Sahab came and stood beside the young teacher and began testing the knowledge of the young minds in the first class. A young, dark, chubby boy, donning torn knickers and a faded shirt shared his knowledge of the letters, no less than the wisdom of the sages,

"Short a, long a, short i, long i…"

Manohar stood behind the class, watching the children sitting in rows on the jute mats. Their school bags were cheap, stationary most ordinary, most of them were not even in uniform, and those that were, their clothes were dull, faded and torn but these children… Manohar was thinking— "These young denizens of this poor village are shaping their futures despite their hardships. Who knows, one of these students could be a doctor, an engineer, a scientist or an I.A.S officer

like Devraj Singh. But will he too order a reduction in the budget for school meals? The I.A.S hailing from Delhi and Sanatanpur must differ somehow in their souls? I hope there is one I.A.S from Sanatanpur!"

Thinking this, Manohar smiled and someone touched him at that moment. Pulling his pants to his stomach, a student from the last row urged in an inaudible voice,

"Please give me the bottle."

Manohar had in his hands a transparent plastic bottle, filled with water, that he had purchased on a train journey, that his wise wife hadn't thrown away after use. In fact, he brought drinking water to the office in such bottles. He just bought good quality thermos only for his children.

"Why?" he asked in a low voice.

"I don't have a bottle of water. Amma gives me water in a glass bottle."

The child's small fingers were on the small glass bottle kept beside his school bag.

"Ah!' Manohar's face betrayed his momentary surprise, after which he sat akimbo beside the child, caressed his head, kept his bottle next to the small bottle and stood up straight, in such a way as if he didn't know the child at all. However, the senior officer, standing across from the students, had seen what had transpired for those one or two moments, while the other members of the school presented their problems or arrangements with polite tones. Then the bell for the interval rang. The children created a ruckus as if they were a flock of stunned birds.

In the meantime, the officer went to the back of the school and met the members of the self-help group that was in charge of preparing the midday meal for the school. The group consisted of three-four Adivasi women who had thorns at the edge of their cheap sarees. One of them mentioned how her family hadn't seen a single day of starvation since she had got this job. Singh sahib passionately recalled his words… his opinion of the self-help groups!

With a downcast face, he returned to the school and the gentleman from Delhi witnessed the discipline of hunger in Bundelkhand. All the children quietly stood in a queue, empty plates in hand, their eyes filled with the fragrant, fresh food kept on the counter. A complete pin-drop silence! So many children standing properly without any fear or being scolded. I.A.S officer, Devraj, the chief executive officer of the district panchayat had learnt the lesson of his life in this small, village school.

The line started moving and this was the proper moment when the officer could prove his significance. He looked at the fearless face of his clerk and in the very next moment, had a line of worry creased his

high forehead.

An order was issued that one of these children was to be seated separately and fed. A child was immediately seated on the ground in front of the senior officer's chair.

It was an eight-year-old boy with deep, sunken eyes, the bones of whose chest could be counted and who looked darker because of his mealy complexion. His clothes were not dirty but sewn in different places with threads of varying colors. The child's large eyes appeared larger in fear. His emaciated hands held the edges of his plate tightly.

"Don't be afraid. Eat, like you do every day." The sahib said.

The child started eating. Both the officer and the clerk observed his plate while the child was plagued by the fear of his plate being taken away—a fact that was clearer by the minute. Dunking a tiny piece of chapatti into the watery Tur dal broth, he was eating so fast that his mouth was full all the time and his eyes watered with his efforts of swallowing his food as fast as he could.

The officer counted—

One… two… three… four… five… six… seven…

The kid was on his seventh chapatti.

It took a mere minute to reach the decision. Leaving the clerk standing there, the senior officer hurriedly walked away; but his stride felt weak outside, he couldn't help but look back,

…the child was hiding the remaining one-and-a-half chapatti in his school bag.

Translated by Rituparna Mukherjee

The New Colony

Like old wine in a new bottle, the grand entrance gate accommodates a charm warding off the evil eye. Children with bulky backpacks are boarding AC school buses. Their trendy housewife mothers, wearing capri-shirts, are managing their dupattas while escorting the children to their respective buses. Cars are heading towards offices and businesses. Busy gentlemen in the back seats, engrossed in their phones, ignore the saluting guards. Maids aged eleven, thirteen, and fifteen are heading to work, and the colony's security guards are teasing them. In front of the posh Colony, on the bushes by the highway, delicate sunlight is blooming like soft flowers amidst the clouds of dust raised by the passing vehicles. On the other side, the colonizer's machinery is transforming the remaining jungle into a bald and exposed piece of earth. Across the highway road, two tall boards stand: …Under Construction Blue Jungle City, …Newly Constructed Blue Fountain City.

The chirping of birds in the lush palm trees at the colony gate has suddenly fallen silent; everything else seems to be fine. In the third bungalow of the second row, the homemaker, after bidding farewell to both her children on the school bus and her husband in the car, has placed water in the crystal jug on the upper bedroom window sill. Now, she is feeding boiled meat to the two German Shepherds. She looks quiet and melancholic. Indian males prefer women who only give and remain silent in return. After everyone leaves in the morning, she collects the dishes, picks up the wet towels on the bed, sorts discarded clothes, welcomes everyone when they return, and manages the household in their absence… Everyone and anyone who knows her—neighbours, relatives, or friends—recalls her as the high watermark for being a perfect homemaker!

In the midst of the covered campus colony, the garden park between the rows, and the small trees with flowers along the blue-black roads, the voice of nature has suddenly become mute for some unknown reason; everything else is just fine. In the first bungalow of the first row, the elderly couple is sitting in their veranda. They are talking to their sons on their new smartphones so loudly that even without a phone, they could hear them, whether in Australia or Norway or London!

The Persian cat starts to cry mysteriously, though its old, lonely, retired owner, jogging under the Palash trees in the park, was right beside her. These trees were spared because of their whimsical structural irregularities. After spending a whole life on her own terms, now this successful woman has only her Persian cat left to talk to. Fatigued by her own obesity, she sits down to do yoga and is thinking

of taking the cat to the doctor today.

Someone passes by the outside of a duplex like a breeze, unnoticed. There is a lot of activity in this house. The bride, who got married the day before yesterday, will return to her parental home for the post-wedding rituals today. The preparations for welcoming the son-in-law are more meticulous than for the daughter. The father left early in the morning to buy flowers. The mother, despite making many food items, is not tired, and the younger brother is coming out with a box of fireworks… He has never confessed to his sister that he loves her as much as he loves their mother.

The breeze has stopped as if the breaths of some invisible entity have dissolved itself in it thus making it heavy; everything else seems to be fine as usual—normal.

The young mother in the second bungalow of the second row has again overslept and is getting late for the office; the help is late today as well. Rushing and juggling her tiffin, laptop, and files, she sprints to the car like an expert circus gymnast. In her busy schedule, she has forgotten to say goodbye to her ten-month-old daughter, who watches her from the lap of her governess. For the better upbringing of this child born out of a 'live-in' relationship, the young mother has decided never to get married and feels that single parenting is a noble path she has embarked upon.

As if there is someone; a shadow who remains fearless of human powers! Something is poised to happen, echoes scream silently; everything else is going well in the colony as usual. The young boys from neighbouring houses, enjoying their annual school holidays, are playing online games on their phones; they have returned the breakfast that their indulgent mother had brought to their room's threshold… The insistence on privacy is so strong that even parents approach their wards with utmost caution.

Life here is so engulfed in its immediacies that the sixth sense of nature has become blunt. Nothing can be inferred instinctually. People, in the illusion of security, are casually carrying out their daily chores.

The guards at the main gate of the colony are greeting the approaching elongated car seating a familiar guest with suppressed smirks. Like every day, the posh colony appears busy in its prosperity.

Now…

In a well-decorated drawing room of a duplex, an eleven-year-old maid is operating a vacuum cleaner. A stuffed deer decorates the corner of the sofa; behind it, a leopard. Before carrying on with the cleaning, for a moment, the girl thinks of fondling the leopard—is the newly delivered decorative item actually a toy or a corpse or a toy made from a corpse? The little girl wants to play with the life-like toy,

but her mother advises her not to be tempted by such things in the employer's house!

"Oh! This really looks like the real thing!" —no sooner does she advance towards the stuffed toy with the vacuum cleaner, than it starts to seem more life-like… and as she watches, the toy crouches as if planning to attack, and that's when she realizes that the toy is actually a wild leopard! For a moment, the girl's blood freezes in terror and then, her life instincts kicking in, she runs outside.

"Leopard!! A leopard!! Help! There's a leopard in the house!"…Her mother taught her that if you get into trouble, try to run away; try to scream. The girl's screams resonate through the quiet elite colony.

"There's a leopard! There's a leopard inside!! There's a leopard!!" Startled, people fall to the ground. Everyone has a phone in hand, but no one realizes that they need to use it. They all run towards the direction of the screaming.

The girl makes a run for it. The crowd is gathering outside the duplex, and the elderly couple is stranded on the upper floor; the leopard must be downstairs. People standing at a distance are discussing ways to handle the issue at hand.

"Somebody, dial the 100."

"No, not the police; call the forest department."

"Someone, call their children."

" London, No?"

"No, Norway!"

The elderly couple, parents of three successful sons, not sure whom to call, exchange their new phone between themselves dropping the phone altogether in this panic, and it falls from the balcony, shattering with a clatter.

"No, the eldest one lives in Australia!"

"Not London! Nor Norway! Neither Australia! The leopard on the ground floor and the elderly couple on the first-floor balcony are the only truth at this moment."

Some five to ten minutes have elapsed since the alarm and no one has yet located the leopard hence the alarm seems to appear false with each passing moment. Someone is saying that these poor people can even murder to attract attention!

Anyway, the guards are sent forward. All three muster the courage to peek through the door. The leopard is not visible anywhere.

"We won't go inside."

"Then why are you here?"

"Builder sa'ab had asked us to salute you, stop beggars and salespersons, not to catch dangerous animals." —The inexperienced young guard who came to the city last month steps back.

"Do you know how much society maintenance we need to cough up

employing you?"

"Sir, our guns are not real—they are airguns!"

"What???"

People are startled. So far, their lives and property have been safe in the hands of these untrained, bird-shooting gunslingers!

"Hey, hey, hey!"

The brother of the bride has thrown in an ignited firecracker in the drawing room. A tremor runs through the crowd… when the leopard emerges from inside!

"A whole leopard!!"

A live, unshackled, wild leopard amidst them leaves the people in shock. After running out of the house, it now leaps towards the crowd… the frightened people, in panic, collide with each other, stumbling and falling.

A man, who has fallen on the ground. found one of the paws of the animal on his head and when the paw lifts, it leaves scratches on the bald head, like a prophecy written in blood… When the creature runs in another direction it trips an extra-padded, asthma patient, triggering an asthma attack. Where is the nebulizer that he always carries? He feels as if his life breath is escaping his body! Before the leopard kills him, the very presence of the animal is enough to cause a heart attack! Yet a lady in her desperate attempt to escape the leopard actually entangles herself with it and screams loud enough to shatter the sky, this makes the leopard more aggressive… Someone throws a pot from somewhere, and the leopard which is about to tear apart the old saggy neck that it has caught, disengages its jaw. The colony, where no one has ever been heard talking loudly, is now resonating with the screams of residents. Injured and healthy people are scrambling, scampering, but are unable to escape properly. All those well-organized, multi-tasking people have never thought about a direct encounter with death! …While death is leaping around, the unfortunate, single, fur-parent is frantically searching for her Persian cat, but it's nowhere to be found.

Now, the leopard, surrounded by small pots of flowers or streets or stretches of short grass, is completely disoriented—neither finding his jungle nor his cave!

…Cave??

He enters an unlocked duplex.

"The baby is inside! Baby is inside!!"

The maid working in the house is screaming. She came out without closing the door hearing the commotion. The three-month-old baby is sleeping peacefully inside her cradle.

In a total panic, she keeps trying to call her employer. The single-parent mother is busy conducting an important presentation in front

of her more important foreign clients using every skill she has learnt with all her heart to make the right impression. On the pretext of sipping water, she glances at her phone and finds her baby peacefully asleep in her cot through the CCTV feed and disconnects the call from her maid once again.

A thirteen-year-old boy, giving his smartphone to a friend, rushes into the apartment, wanting to become a hero by displaying bravery in a live-stream on social media. Three minutes later, lifting the baby in his arms, he comes out. People start applauding.

The friend asks him, "Did you encounter the leopard there?"

"Leopard?? Was there a leopard inside? I thought the baby was trapped in the fire." The friend stopped the live video.

While everyone is attentive towards the animal, the single fur-parent has found her Persian cat behind the small flower pots. How scared the cat is; the owner, unable to control her obese body, flops onto the floor, holding her cat tightly to her bosom. The cat's warmth reaches the heart… to the heart that has stopped working? …While someone is calling an ambulance from a distance; the owner, hugging the cat, has collapsed.

Someone closes the door of the apartment quickly. After a while, the leopard jumps from the upper balcony to the nearby second balcony.

The leopard is now in front of the lovers. For a moment, the situation seems like the housewife's husband is standing in front of them. More than the fear of the leopard, the collective voices from below are worrying the couple; people seem to gather in front of their house!

Just before the rude arrival of the animal into the balcony, the girlfriend who was feeling safe in her lover's arms; feels increasingly insecure and finds the leopard a better company than her clandestine lover. Now, neither can they run away, nor is there time to wear clothes! …and before the leopard can do anything, the housewife looks around and grabs a glass jug filled with water, and throws it.

The poor prowler, panicking, jumps from the balcony or falls from it; landing right between two unchained German Shepherds within the fence. Tall, strong, wolf-like hounds, who have never been afraid of anyone in their entire lives, trained to be offensive on intruders and raised purely on meat. …and on the opposite end, is a wild leopard in front of them from the jungle! Both pairs of hunting dogs launch an attack together on the magnificent hunter of the jungle who is not exactly fighting fit at the moment. On one side, the best-trained pair, and on the other side, talent nurtured in the jungle by Mother Nature —no more like a cruel father! While the three are engaged in a bloody struggle, many in the distant crowd witness true violence for the first time outside W.W.E. and Animal channels. Some, in their extreme

excitement, call up the fire brigade, police, forest department, T.V. channels—whomever they can. People are crying for help desperately. Children of the complex, who have come running to the spectacle, are now being pulled away by their mothers.

As the owner of the fifth duplex makes an appearance, some people shift their attention away from the leopard. The one with the most glamorous face in the colony and also the most fashionable; oh, how ordinary and somewhat aged, she looks without makeup and in domestic clothes! …Distances create magic; proximity often proves not to be so beautiful. Even the oldest of the residents has appeared. People have seen him after months. Life seems like a rodeo where all those who are done riding are merely waiting to be put down! …The face of the colony is equally attractive and indifferent to all those who live there.

After a fierce struggle, the leopard, soaked in blood, stands up—like a champion world wrestler! Leaving the hunting dogs in their last breaths, he jumps over the boundary. Passing through the pygmy flower pots, the leopard sits on the lush American grass right in the middle of the covered campus. People calling the rescue team to catch the leopard cry hoarse over the phone spurring the officials to arrive instantaneously, making phone calls incessantly.

Passing through the dust and smoke of the highway road, frightening the birds of the lush palm trees, panicking the Persian cat with its presence, electrifying the natural environment, running like the wind, and making its presence felt in the echo, the leopard, who has come this far, is now sitting calmly. The ground under its body is absorbing the blood from the wounds; the same ground on which once a slender river, 'Neel Jharna,' used to flow. Now, only the remaining two Palash trees are the signs of that time.

And…

The leopard remembers the path of his return to his abode, drinking water from the river, passing under these trees, the way back to the jungle! The leopard runs. Jumping and bounding, crossing the colony, the grand gate, the grander charm on it, crossing the highway road, crossing the machines killing the trees of the Neel Jungle with its leaps, it dissolves itself in the remaining part of the jungle. The commotion in the colony subsides, and who knows what happens in the jungle next!

Translated by Pritesh Chakraborty

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Indira Dangi (b. 1980) is a well-known novelist, storyteller, and dramatist of Hindi Literature. She has published four novels and more than 50 short stories in Hindi, over only 10 years of a writing career. She won India's prestigious Sahitya Akademi Yuwa Award-2015 for her story collection—१०० Premikayen and Other Stories. She has also won nine other prestigious national-level literary awards in India. Her works of drama are staged in the USA, Nepal, and other countries. Her works of fiction have been translated into Nepali, English, and other Indian Languages. She is also an active Professor and researcher steadfastly committed to the popularization of literature and humanity in the community through popular lectures and community engagement programs. She lives and works in Bhopal, MP, India.

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